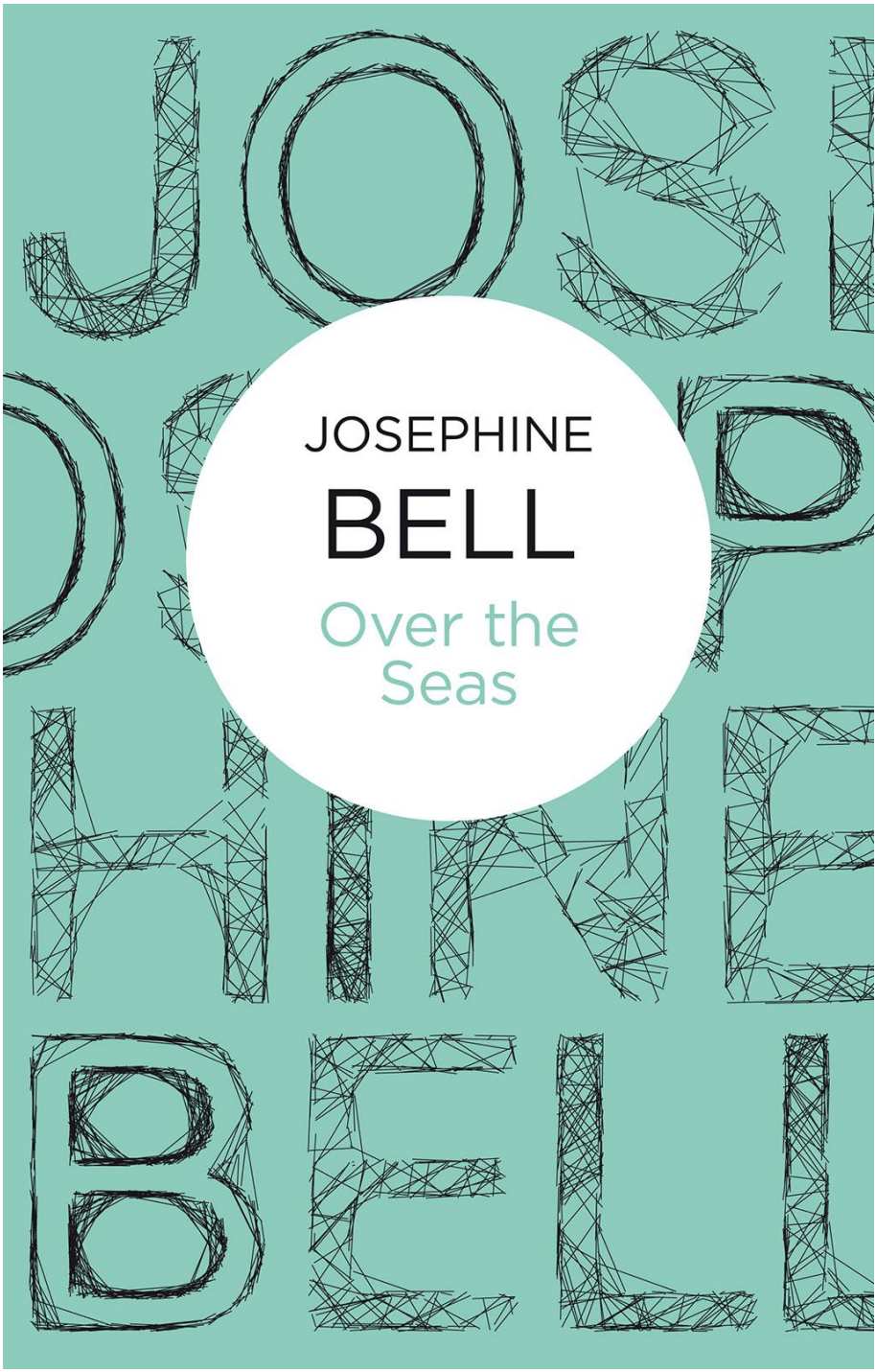
JOSEPHINE
BELL
Over the
Seas

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hidden talent rediscovered!

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Josephine Bell

Over the Seas

Josephine Bell

Josephine Bell was born Doris Bell Collier in Manchester, England. Between 1910 and 1916 she studied at Godolphin School, then trained at Newnham College, Cambridge until 1919. At the University College Hospital in London she was granted M.R.C.S. and L.R.C.P. in 1922, and a M.B.B. S. in 1924.

Bell was a prolific author, writing forty-three novels and numerous uncollected short stories during a forty-five year period.

Many of her short stories appeared in the *London Evening Standard*. Using her pen name she wrote numerous detective novels beginning in 1936, and she was well-known for her medical mysteries. Her early books featured the fictional character Dr. David Wintringham who worked at Research Hospital in London as a junior assistant physician. She helped found the Crime Writers' Association in 1953 and served as chair during 1959–60.

Chapter One

When Alec Nimmo opened his eyes for the first time after falling into a tortured sleep that he had believed would be his last, he saw above him not the cold whiteness that had been his last view of the cruel earth but a close, ill-smelling darkness that moved and muttered before his unfocused vision. He shut his eyes again, convinced that his worst fears, his dread of a deserved hell, had been realised, that he was now descended into the pit, hence the darkness, and would shortly begin to suffer his well-merited and ever-lasting punishment.

True, he felt nothing. The agony of the last two days and nights, when he had stumbled along the snow-covered, lonely track of Glen Shiel, without shelter, without food, was over. It had been a forced march that had kept his feet from frostbite until plain exhaustion halted them. That and the sight of the loch, sheeted with steel-grey ice over the inmost, shoreward tongue of it that lay northwards from Shiel Bridge at the foot of the last of the Five Sisters of Kintail. As he struggled round this fringe of ice, staggering among great boulders only thinly covered with snow, Alec's strength ebbed more quickly. It had been upheld for so long and so precariously by his obstinate intention of reaching the Western Isles. Or at least to find the shores of open water. He believed this icy loch, this present frozen stretch, seeing the main part led ever westwards, would take him there. He was almost upon those long wished-for shores, that other, western sea.

Slowly he gained the farther side of the inlet. As night began to fall he staggered on beside the water, floundering in deep snow, weakening with every step, until a mere fallen pine sapling tripped him and he could not force himself to rise again. He had found just sufficient strength to unroll his plaid over his legs and thrust his hands into the folds and then, fixing his eyes on the white mountain beside and above him, to pray forgiveness of his sins and commend his soul to God.

So when the first horror of his awakening passed, his instant fear of hell-fire provoked in him a spirit of rejection and

argument and anger that very soon persuaded him he must still be alive and getting more so as the moments passed. It was not now horror that kept his eyes closed and his body limp and motionless but a very prudent caution.

The hunters who bent over him, there were six of them, understood readily when they found him that here was no corpse but a lost traveller who, if profitable, might qualify for a grave later, but otherwise, being apparently young and well-built, might be taken as a recruit. Their local chieftain, their lord, had lost too many men in his last serious affray, one that still awaited vengeance. There could be praise, perhaps reward for them and as a secondary consideration succour for the fallen wretch, if they were to carry him back as their prize.

They came to their conclusion in soft Gaelic voice and speech, the mutterings that Alec, had first thought to be demons' gloating. They cut up the branches of the pine sapling over which he had fallen and made a litter on to which they lifted him, wrapping him about with their own plaids and one folded under his head. Then they set off, two at each end of the litter and one upon either side to prevent his rolling off it.

During all this time Alec kept his eyes closed, though he made one or two little moans when they touched him to encourage them to hope for his recovery. He did not know that their first act had been to search him for any wealth of gold or weapons. Nor that when they found nothing of value, only a little leather sack of papers on a cord round his neck, they decided against destroying him in favour of presenting him to the constable of their castle.

Knowing where the narrow track lay above the loch side the hunters moved steadily and with far fewer stops to avoid drifts than Alec on his staggering attempt. But after a time the smell of salt water and lapping of little waves on stones told him his captors or rescuers had made their way to the shore. So he was not surprised when he found himself lifted bodily on his litter to the floorboards of a wide-bottomed boat.

He judged rightly that the men were too much occupied with their present tasks to notice him. So he opened his eyes again, ready to close them, move or groan as the occasion demanded.

But his view was limited, for the boat's freeboard rose beside at either hand, made of rough planking, tarred without skill or

workmanship. Above him a heavy sky promised more snow. He had no land in sight, which did not trouble him, but two pairs of leather-clad legs, whose presence recommended further caution.

He allowed himself an audible sigh of relief and pleasure when the boat was pushed off from the rocks and floated free. It was not heard, or at all events no one came to stare at him or ask a question. He rightly judged now that he was expected to live, at any rate for the present; that he was some sort of a prize, at lowest an offering. He wished he had tried harder to learn the Gaelic during his last six months of wandering in the Scottish Highlands. He had at first been too indifferent to his fate and latterly, as fatigue and semi-starvation weakened him, too incapable.

After a time the easy rhythm of the oars checked, the blades slithering on the surface of the water. The voices of the men in the boat were raised to shouts, ropes splashed, were caught, made fast. The craft rocked to a standstill and again Alec felt hands about him, lifting him up, conveying him to some other shore. When he was lowered once more he felt at once a new and blessed warmth in his surroundings. Also he heard fresh voices on a higher note and was thankful to know that there were women there.

He decided that the time was ripe to show some further signs of life before his rescuers lost interest and threw him in the loch. So he opened his eyes, stared wildly about him and exclaimed in one of the few Gaelic phrases he had acquired, ‘Where am I? What is this place?’

He saw he was lying in a small round room, with plain rough stone walls, a brazier set against one of them and high in the roof an opening to the sky. He repeated his question, struggling to raise himself upon one elbow.

The burst of explanation that greeted his question confused him, though it soothed his fears. He was thankful to observe in the fierce faces of the hunters a certain simple pride in their completed work. The prize lived; it had been worth the effort of saving him. He noticed the leader among them turn to a younger follower to dispatch him with a message. No doubt to announce his arrival.

A stout elderly woman now stepped forward. When she began to question him and he shook his head she tried again, this time

in the halting Scots he had encountered farther south, but nowhere north of Laggan.

He answered in simple phrases, judging she understood about half of what he said. Enough, at any rate, to command her further compassion or perhaps only whet her curiosity. For she gave orders in firm tones and he was lifted and conveyed again, from the guardhouse or whatever that small round shelter had been, to a larger apartment, where a fine log fire burned on an open hearth near which a wooden settle stood at one side and a couple of stools the other.

He was laid upon the settle, his soaked and frozen clothes removed to be replaced by dry ones, warmed at the blaze, the borrowed plaids laid aside, his own hung over the settle back to dry. The old woman then drew a stool close and began to feed him sips of warm broth, talking all the while in a mixture of Gaelic and Scots that would have made him laugh in happier times. But just now there was not a laugh in him, only a small new stirring of the wish to live.

He sipped steadily, the warmth without and within creeping slowly into every part of his being. When he fell asleep as he drank, his mouth still accepting the broth though it might choke him, the old woman took the bowl away, turned him a little on his side to breathe more easily and went off to report to the constable.

The castle or stronghold of Elian Donan, to which Alec Nimmo had been conveyed, stood on the northern shore of Loch Duich, not very far from the mouth of the loch where it entered or grew from the Sound of Sleat. A narrow causeway led from the main gates of the castle to the mainland shore, so that the waters of the loch surrounded the building on three sides. At stormy spring tides, particularly at the equinoxes, the water covered the causeway itself on the flood, so that the strong stone walls became a true island, while the ebb left a slimy slippery track impassable for a few days by horse or cart.

Not that this was of much significance. The men of the castle went to and from the place for the most part by boat, landing on the rocky shores of the loch to hunt the deer over the mountains that rose high behind Eilan Donan, or, on the opposite side of the loch, over the slopes of Mam Ratachan. From boats, too, they raided along the fertile valley towards Kyle of Lochalsh,

where the narrow sea ran between the mainland and Kyleakin on the Isle of Skye.

The old woman, confident from the success of her act of mercy, found the constable brooding over some recent news of the MacRae, from whom he held his post under the Mackenzie, overlord of all the northern shores and slopes of Loch Duich. The garrison of Eilan Donan were for the most part MacRaes. And they were growing restless at the absence of Christopher, their chieftain.

The constable greeted his visitor kindly, welcoming the distraction. ‘Ye have news for me! Life-saving and life-giving, I hear. Nought checks ye, even though thy dugs be dry these twenty years and more.’

He spoke, like his men, in the Gaelic, but more familiarly because she had fostered him as a child when his own mother died. He was the sole survivor into manhood of a string of ill-fated boys, cut off in childhood by disease or accident, by drowning or rock-fall and one by the spear of an affronted follower, who had suffered a slow death for his crime.

The constable had been fortunate in his fostering, for Mistress Biurnag MacRae held a privileged position at the castle, not only that of nurse to an orphan child, but also to the heir of the chieftain. She had been the orphan’s protector and mentor through a dangerous and difficult childhood. She belonged to the clan MacArthur, pipers to the great MacDonald of South Skye. Their skill in their art set them above many of the lesser septs who owned that chieftainship. But she had left her father’s house and allegiance in a runaway marriage to an adventurous MacRae and so come to Eilan Donan, a bride respected for her courage. In these later years of widowhood, she ruled the castle servants, kept the men occupied in useful tasks, thwarted their too frequent traffic with the maids and kept them from quarrels with the fighting men. She saw to the conduct of the kitchens and directed the constable’s own nursery, where his unwilling wife, of whom he had grown heartily sick, spent her days complaining and her nights in secret drunkenness.

‘Some hunting fellows brought me a rich prize,’ Mistress Biurnag answered. ‘Far spent, indeed. The likes of a hunted man, to my way of thinking. Starving and travel-worn. But he’ll mend and do us credit. A much needed replacement. An he could

speak our tongue I'd swear from his stature he was MacRae and nought else. But he hath not above five words of the Gaelic. A hunted man, as I told thee. A lowland Scot made outlaw by ill-fortune. What did our chieftain want of thee?'

'As ever. Men and boats. He would go into Skye though it is not a twelvemonth since he was at war again with the MacDonald.'

'That quarrel will never end.'

Mistress MacRae nodded and sighed. Men were made to be for ever at war, clan against clan, sept against sept, from the lesser chieftains like her master the MacRae, to the great overlords,

'Where will he find ships?' she asked. 'We have none fit for the open sea. Nor men to take them there.'

He blazed at her, suddenly furious with the truth and hearing it from her old lips. Furious, too, bcause he was but the constable with no real power in the place and ill-liked into the bargain, being considered an upstart and an orphan of an alien brood, though clever.

'Back to your prize as ye call him!' he yelled. 'Bring him to what strength ye can before I lose patience and have him flung in the loch as a useless mouth in our midst! Has forgot it be winter and stores dwindling?'

She hurried away before the devil that dwelt in him took control and ordered what he threatened. It was a hard, sly, cruel devil, she knew, that possessed this Torquil, her foster-son. She had known it from his early childhood, when the pretty boy, so happy, so quick in his mind, had one day come back to her from a long absence in the hills, with a pale face and secret smile and wickedness in his eye. She had feared and questioned and had discovered at last the cause of his foul hidden pleasure. With two old hags and a gormless youth who had acted as the boy's guide, he had attended a coven with a known warlock who lived outside a neighbouring hamlet. They had roasted a live cat to call forth the Devil and from that day her charge had been possessed by this fiend, who stood at his shoulder at all times and leaped into his heart and soul whenever it had the chance.

She hurried back to Alec, half afraid he was already threatened. But she found him still sleeping and set about preparing a more solid meal for him when he should wake.

It took three weeks to bring the fugitive back to some kind of

health and in all that time Mistress Biurnag MacRae kept him close, locking him in or rather locking others out. But by the end of that time, when he was able to walk strongly about the room and had put back sufficient of his flesh to look like a man rather than a starved corpse, as she told him laughing, he began to chafe at his imprisonment.

'I owe it to my host to offer my thanks for his hospitality,' he said stiffly, with deliberate formality.

He could never be sure how much Mistress Biurnag understood of his Scots speech and so he had worked hard with her help to learn something of the Gaelic. He spoke now in that tongue. She was delighted.

'Ye say well,' she told him, practising her own Scots, which she in turn had improved in his company. 'I'll tell thee now how to speak to our constable and ye shall say thy piece to him in the tongue he prefers.'

She went on to explain that though Eilan Donan was a stronghold of the Mackenzie it was usually held by MacRae, the chieftain being Christopher of that ilk whose heir was Farquhar, though both were absent at this time.

'The constable is Torquil MacGilchrist. Raised here by me but not truly of these parts,' she told him.

The following day Alec was taken into the presence of this Torquil MacGilchrist, who received him with polite friendliness and bade him sit down. Mistress Biurnag, at a signal, withdrew. She had offered to remain as interpreter, but this produced such an instant fiery gleam in the constable's small dark eyes that she did not persist, but instantly moved away.

Alec said his prepared short speech in Gaelic. Torquil bowed his head, acknowledging the compliment. A silence slowly filled the room, not menacing, but oppressive. At last the constable said in Gaelic, 'Ye come from the south. Where from? With what purpose? At whose command?'

'My own,' Alec answered. 'In flight from the law. Because I had killed a man.'

The constable gave a loud, disdainful laugh.

'One man? Ye killed just one man? Are they then so particular where ye come from that the law hunts a man for one death?'

'It was in London,' Alec said, watching the other's face grow still again. 'In England.'

‘So.’ There was now a childlike bewilderment where the fierce amusement had been. ‘But ye are a Scot!’

‘I am a seaman,’ Alec said. ‘That first. But indeed I am a Scot.’

He had prepared his story long since, during his voyage to the Forth from London river. He had told it over and over again on his bitter journeying from Fife into the Highlands, a journey that had begun in the autumn of the year before and continued, as he had foreseen and feared, into the dark and frozen winter in these wilds where he had so nearly met his end.

‘Tell me,’ the constable ordered.

Partly in halting Gaelic when Torquil clearly was not following, but chiefly in the Scots of his father’s fishermen. Alec told his story, or rather that part of it that began with the killing of Robert Kenty in a tavern near Bellyns Gate on Thames and his escape on board the coal brig *Sunflower*.

‘I was engaged as crew on that ship,’ Alec explained. ‘I was fortunate in that she sailed upon that same day.’

‘But how came it ye were pursued into Scotland?’ the constable asked, clearly puzzled. He could not understand why a simple seaman was of such importance.

‘The man I slew was a creature of a great Scottish lord,’ Alec said. ‘It was his men sought me out to kill me. I—I dared not wait at Leith for my ship to sail again. Nor take a berth on some other vessel upon the east coast. So I took to the hills to seek the waters upon this side.’

‘Autumn, say’st?’ Torquil said thoughtfully. ‘Thou hast not made overmuch haste upon the road.’

‘I had no means,’ Alec told him. ‘I had to work for my bread. At first there were harvests to help me. I passed from farmstead to farmstead bringing in crops for my keep. Then after harvest there were byres to mend or roofs to thatch or crown with mud. But as winter drew on the work grew scarce and the homesteads fewer. As I came north and west the land grew wild and bare. The folk were jealous of their meagre stores. There were days together without food or shelter.’

‘I marvel no one of the clans took ye in,’ Torquil said smoothly, with a lift of his black eyebrows.

Alec grinned.

‘There was a time or two some tried to persuade me,’ he said. ‘But I had no mind to join them.’

The constable smiled.

'I think there be more than one death notched on thy blade, friend,' he said.

'In self-defence I count it no sin,' Alec protested. 'Nor,' he sighed, 'was that other death. The man I slew came between me and my sworn enemy. Him I meant to kill but the other took my sword by accident.'

'Sword!' exclaimed Torquil, instantly suspicious. 'A seaman fighting with a sword!'

'Blade!' Alec corrected quickly. 'Cutlass! We seamen went ashore armed. There be evil lurkers in the shadows by the wharves on London river.'

'I understand,' Torquil answered, but warily. 'So ye trod the hornets' nests and came through to Kintail. There are few have done the like. It puts me in mind of those lads King Jamie sent to bring what he calls order to these parts and to the Isles. Adventurers, he called them.'

'The Fife Adventurers,' Alec agreed. 'Aye, I have heard of them.'

'No doubt. Since ye come from Fife? Did ye not say?'

Alec could not remember if he had said so or not. He was beginning to wonder if he had not already said too much. He had noticed a wolfish expression pass across the face of his host from time to time and he was wholly in the man's power. Also he knew he was still far from his full strength. Even seated, this long interview was making his head ache and the room begin to swim before his eyes.

'But ye are not yourself a Fife Adventurer?' the constable asked with another short sharp laugh.

'That am I not,' Alec answered as stoutly as he could. 'I am a seaman and fisherman. I've tell't ye,' he said, reverting to his Scots speech. 'I ken the sea and ships. I want nothing else, so I can earn my bread by my work.'

The constable rose. He no longer looked dangerous, merely friendly. He struck Alec lightly on the shoulder.

'We are sorely in need of seamen,' he said. 'Go find thy health more fully under my old Burnie's care. She'll give it thee. I'll hae a use for thy skills …'

Torquil paused. Alec was on his feet now. The constable had used the Scots for his last remark and he took this for a form of

dismissal. Torquil said softly, looking up into Alec's face, for he was not a tall man, 'I hae no heard thy name, friend.'

'Jock Bridie, so please ye,' Alec said, using the name he had held to since he fled from England.

'Bridie,' the constable repeated. He was speaking the Scots with more confidence since Alec had told his story and the latter guessed that at one time he had known it to speak, to his parents perhaps or to his equals among the chieftains, when the Gaelic would not serve.

'Jock Bridie,' Torquil repeated. 'Go then, Jock. Go see my boats. There's work there and but one old man left that understands it. Maybe thou can'st help him.

'Aye, sir, willingly,' Alec said.

He bowed slightly, to cover the weakness that had suddenly assailed his knees. The constable acknowledged his bow with a curt nod and turned away.

Alec moved unsteadily to the door. Mistress Biurnag MacRae was waiting for him at the turn of the passage. She took his arm to support him back to her room, where he sank upon the settle, quite exhausted.

'Hast pleased my sometime foster-child?' she asked, when he had his breath back.

'Well enough,' he answered. 'There will be work for me at the boats in such time as I am fit to undertake it.'

It was scarcely the answer she deserved, but his interview had vastly increased his caution. Mistress MacRae showed no disappointment. She said only, 'Nial will be pleased. He is old, his sight is leaving him. The men begin to mock him at his bench so that his tools slip and he hurts himself and spoils the wood.'

Alec nodded. He would help old Nial and keep these wild Highland wolves at bay. But first he must find his strength.

'I need to move about more,' he said, as much to himself as to the old woman. 'Breathe the outside air, build up my limbs again. I hae rotted too long.'

Seeing the dismay in her old face he jumped up to lay an arm across her shoulders.

'The rot was within,' he said, 'where thy good care and excellent food made no change. The fault was not thine.'

She did not answer him directly, but led him to the narrow

window that looked over the water to where the distant hills of Skye stood out, snow-covered against a pale March sky. The early sunshine glittered on the water of the loch. On the opposite shore bright yellow kelp hung on the black rocks as the ebbing tide uncovered them.

'The winter is passing,' she said. 'See, below there. Spring will unfold the sea pinks presently. A pretty carpet under my window.'

Chapter Two

All through March and well into April Alec worked on the boats with the old carpenter Nial MacRae. Like the rest of his clan he was conspicuous for his tall figure, which gave him a formidable appearance though his arms and legs were skinny, the muscles wasted by age. Knowing his usefulness was fast coming to an end and that he had little to expect but a grudged diet and a corner by some fire, he had struggled on through the winter patching up the boats where they leaked but never wholly curing their many defects. Alec's arrival one morning at Nial's working shelter nearly overcame the old man with its unexpected relief and sudden hope.

'Did they not warn ye I would be set to help?' Alec asked, taking hold of Nial's arm to steady him, for the shipwright had swayed and gasped as at an apparition.

'Mistress Biurnag did come to me some days past to warn me, but my memory serves me ill. It had passed from my mind.'

'Then command me now,' Alec urged him. 'I hae been idle for too long. Show me the work; direct me to your planks and tools. I am wholly at your service.'

Nial drew a long breath, straightening himself to his full height, his pride, his pleasure too, aroused by the stranger's polite speech. The accent was foreign but the Gaelic was fluent, the build of the young man surely MacRae.

'Come,' he said. 'If thy skill matches thy intention then indeed we are fortunate.'

Old Nial was not disappointed. He soon discovered that Alec's knowledge of boats was greater than his own and his experience of many sorts of craft far wider. Together they ripped out rotten planks, made new ones to fit, overlapping them in the way the fishermen's shipwrights had used in Alec's father's yards at Pittenweem in the East Neuk of Fife. They caulked the seams with linen waste and tarred the whole from lumps of the stuff melted on an iron plate over a brazier.

'The laddies bring me these treasures from the vessels they take as prizes,' Nial explained. 'There's great ships come sailing

up the Sound of Sleat, thinking to miss the rough waters beyond Skye and so come to the Islands by an inside passage. They wot not the perils they may meet, the narrow pass at Kyle, the rocks, the swift thrust of the tide, the ambush from either hand.'

'Where did they come from and not know of these perils?' Alec asked, for it seemed sheer foolhardiness.

'From Ireland, hoping to raid us as we raid them. From England when the old queen fought us. From France when they welcomed them as allies in the south, in the Lowlands. But all are prizes to us if we can take them.'

Not for the first time Alec came to the conclusion that in these barbarous parts there was neither honesty nor honour, neither loyalty nor truth, but simply an overweening lust for gain, for wealth and for all possible means to secure it; for power, no matter from whom wrested, by whatever treachery, at whoever's expense.

But he said nothing of all this to a living soul though in imaginary conversations with his lost friend, Francis Leslie, he argued the rights and wrongs of this wild mode of living, his pleasure in the newly budding spring on the hills, the faint mist of green above the loch shore. Remembering the long journey to London in the king's train, four years ago, he grieved as well as argued. He could guess what Francis would say to his attempted excuses. His friend lamented the hot tempers of his race, that Alec shared, the unbound rage that had ruined him, parted them, brought him to Eilan Donan and its garrison of wild men, pirates, bandits and murderers.

As they brought the boats into good repair Nial and Alec launched them to soak the new wood and take up the seams. They let the children who played about the loch shore bale out the water that seeped into the boats and then mop them dry. As children always do, the bairns began by being useful, but soon grew mischievous giving more trouble than help. In the end Alec had to chase them away.

When the hulls were mended Alec cut and fashioned waste strips of wood to make floorboards for the boats, a refinement that Nial affected to despise though secretly he admired it. As each craft passed its test in the water, the two men took it out on the loch to try it further. Sometimes they rowed across to Torig on the far side where some little bays provided shelter

from the prevailing westerly wind and they could beach their boats on a steep but sandy shore safe from the attentions of the children. After one or two trips Alec suggested taking their tools over where they could work in so much more comfort than on the narrow landing strip at the castle.

By the middle of April they had the largest of the three longboats beached across the loch where they had towed it, helped by two of the stronger servants. The fighting men, though they rowed and steered when on a mission, would not demean themselves to assist their carpenter and his captive assistant, who ranked, though they never told him so, as a chattel or slave.

When the longboat was installed in the sheltered bay, Nial and Alec spent whole days there, taking bread and some form of relish with them for a midday meal and drinking from a small stream that bounded down the hillside behind the beach.

One day, feeling restless after their meal, that normally left Alec as hungry as before he started it, he waited until Nial began to doze in the sun, then climbed up the bill, following the stream from which they filled their horn cups. He found that the water fell straightly where the hillside was smooth, grass-covered apart from some low bushes of broom and gorse and blackberry. But at the first curve inward, where the incline was gentler, the stream changed course, leading Alec into a close thicket of young trees, through which he moved with difficulty.

Presently a further grassy opening appeared and he stopped, jerked suddenly to a standstill by the compact, rounded building before him, neither bothy nor hut nor cottage, as he knew such in Fife or in England, but a man-made edifice without doubt, built of smallish stones laid together and upon one another, narrowing in a kind of rough tower to an open top about twenty to thirty feet above ground level. The uneven height was due, Alec saw at once, to decay over the years. How many years, he wondered, with a shiver of awe at the unfamiliar shape. How long had this dwelling or primitive castle or long deserted shrine stood upon the hillside facing Eilan Donan? What was its history? Its former purpose?

Across the little strip of rock-strewn rough grass there was an opening in the towering side of the monument, for as such, Alec was beginning to regard it. It was a man-made opening, the

stones neatly placed at the sides, one great flat piece across the top about four feet from the ground. Alec went up to it and peered inside.

A rush of wings startled him, making him leap back. As he did so a slim red body with white teeth snarling in the small mask darted by him. He saw the bushy tail whisk behind a large boulder and laughed aloud.

'As startled as myself,' he thought 'But I'll no find human foes where Renard hath his lair.'

He stooped under the doorway and found himself in a grass-covered open space with a few thistles and other weeds beginning to push through the coarse tussocks of last summer. He looked up through the open top to the pale midday April sky. That was the way the birds had gone, he decided. The place, with its rough ledges of stone, made a proper doocot for gulls, he decided. Their droppings gave evidence of its use.

He followed the worn path marked by the fox and came to another opening and looked in. Now he understood the purpose of this fort, for such it must surely be. The great circular wall was hollow. Here the family or small tribe could shelter, in time of war take refuge, hide the women and children, while the fighting men held the main opening and manned the top of the walls to throw rocks or shoot arrows at their attackers. Here now, he found, was the vixen in her lair, ready to defend her cubs though the fox had deserted her. Alec retreated before her maternal wrath and made his way back down the hill to Nial.

The old man was awake, inclined to be angry.

'Where hae ye bin?' he asked, using the Scots speech Alec had been teaching him at his request.

'Up the hill yonder,' Alec answered. 'Following the stream.'

'Ye mauna gang by the forest,' Nial said in a high, cracked voice. He broke into rapid Gaelic. There's an ill place hid behind the trees. An old, accursed, evil tower. ' Tis haunted by the unquiet spirits of men who died there, slain by the MacDonald when he raided and burned Eilan Donan.'

'When was this dread deed done?' Alec asked. 'And why was the fight here and not over the water?'

'It was in my fairther's time,' Nial said, becoming calmer. 'I dinna mind just when that would be. MacDonald drove out Mackenzie from Eilan Donan and burned it and chased the men

out and took the women. He hunted our men over the hills and some he caught above there in the old broch—'

'In the what?' asked Alec.

'Broch, we call them. There's more hereabouts. Pagan churches, some say. Watch towers, say others, against the Norsemen and the Irish. I mind them not. They'll no fright me save with the unhappy souls of those poor slaughtered men of Eilan Donan.'

'Mackenzies?' Alec asked, puzzled by this strange history.

'Aye, maybe one or two. But MacRaes, chiefly. The place is accursed,' Nial said, repeating himself. 'No man goes near those old stones by night and scarcely by day, either. Ask Mistress Biurnag. She hath the whole story of the place, the haunting and the devilment.'

Alec did so and heard some more startling tales of savagery and many curious beliefs such as that the old hero gods had thrown the brochs up on the shores ready-made, unless it was the Devil had done it to spite the saints that brought the Christian faith to the Isles. Also that it was believed by many that the clan MacRae, by reason of the men's exceptional stature, was descended from Ossian and the heroes themselves. That he, Alec, must have MacRae blood in him on account of his own great size and strength.

'Beware ye do nought to anger the constable,' Mistress Biurnag told him, 'or his own particular devil may rule him to thy destruction.'

It was the first he had heard from her of Torquil's devil, but he had no difficulty in believing in him, for he had seen the fiend peep out of the constable's eyes upon more than one occasion when he watched a punishment he had ordered being carried out upon the body of some wretch who had failed in his duty.

By the middle of May Alec and Nial had restored the castle's fleet to full use and had even converted one of the longboats to sail, with a mast and spars cut according to Alec's orders from some seasoned and weathered tree trunks that had not been touched since Nial's father had had them felled in his old age for his son's use in due course. Alec realised as never before, when he was shown this wood after he had suggested the conversion, that Nial had been a poor successor to the former carpenter and

shipwright.

In fact he had spent his days improving the woodwork of the castle itself and neglecting the boats. When Alec was brought to the castle Nial had been at first intensely grateful for the tall seaman's help, but now he was growing jealous of the success he could not altogether claim as his own. But the idea of a sailing ship caused so much excitement all over the castle that he had to pretend to welcome it. And when he saw the finished product and heard the cheers for himself and Alec as, together with the constable, they set out for a trial run on the loch, with Alec at the tiller and himself working the sheets, he lost his jealousy for a time in the pure joy of the swift movement, no jerking, splashing oars, simply a chuckle of little waves on the waterline.

But Alec had watched and considered and had not missed any sign that must be taken as a warning. Besides, he had never intended to spend the rest of his life at Eilan Donan. He had known, during the years he had spent in London at the start of the king's reign, what it was to be a stranger in the land. He was just as much a stranger here, disliked and suspected for his different speech and habits as well as for his unfamiliar skills. He still held to his original plan, which was to find his way by sea on these westerly waters back to England, to the west of England, perhaps to the south-west. There were fishing harbours in those parts, he had heard, with France across the Channel. He should be safe there from the law, London must believe Alec Nimmo dead long since. Jock Bridie lived. Perhaps from some Devon and Cornish port he could send word of his survival to Francis.

For he continued to think of Francis Leslie even while he planned and watched and waited for an opportunity to escape from his present bondage. He and Francis had been close friends as students at St Andrews. Together they had left their studies to follow the king at his accession to the English throne. Together they had shared the excitement and hazards and wonders of that long royal progress to London and together had found lodgings they sometimes shared, sometimes exchanged.

Their parting had been abrupt, disastrous; Alec's flight and subsequent outlawry inevitable. But his disappearance, he hoped, had been complete and though he had escaped capture and death by a hairsbreadth on his return to St Andrews, he still

prayed and hoped that no harm had come to his former friends there, particularly to his early love. In the long days and nights of his journeying into the wilds he had understood fully that this love had died a natural and expected death from separation and his added years. But he knew as well that in all his later traffic with women, especially in his brief passion for Kate Ogilvy, that early love had never been replaced. Janet's face as he had seen her briefly on his return was clearer in his mind than the lovely features of Katherine though he had enjoyed the sight of her for three whole years in London city.

But Francis, his friend, meant more to him than any woman, he swore to himself. It was to Francis he longed to speak, to explain, to beg forgiveness, simply to declare that he still lived and would make all possible amends. Surely by now Francis would have recovered from his sad infatuation for that dangerous and worthless girl. Surely he would have found a worthier object for his devotion.

These thoughts and others like them, sifting his past motives, accepting his failures stoutly, but always looking forward, spurred Alec to plan and prepare his escape. His success with the longboat brought him a good deal of praise. He found he was beginning to be accepted by the fighting men; above all trusted. When he proposed to take a boat out on the loch by himself, no one objected.

He moved slowly and with great care. He made his excursions longer. He took to rowing himself across to the quiet sunny bays at Torig, towing some half-finished craft to work on in the sun. Wrapped in a bundle with his tools and rations for the day he took, piece by piece, the small store of clothing he had accumulated through the kindness of Mistress MacRae, together with some useful objects such as a platter, a pewter mug, a spoon. Above all a dirk he had found in Nial's workshed lying beneath a heap of sawdust, rusty, neglected, but still sound. He had hidden it and later managed to get the blacksmith to sharpen and polish it at the castle forge, saying it was wanted for cutting ropes for the boats. Then privately in solitude across the loch he made a leather sheath for it with a clip to fasten it to his breeches' belt under his jacket. It gave him great comfort to be armed again, though so poorly.

All his small possessions he ferried by degrees, patiently,

ceaselessly, to the far shore of the loch and carried them up the hill beside the stream to the ancient broch, where he hid them in the double wall, covered with a few stones to mark the place and deceive any casual inquisitive visitor. After a few weeks he decided that he had as much as he could conveniently carry and that he might arouse a question in the good housekeeper's mind if his reserve of clothing grew markedly less.

The season helped him. He had not for some time worn the padded jacket the constable had given him soon after his return to work, when Nial had complained that his assistant was too blue and stiff with cold in the shed to be able to handle tools. The jacket was now in the broch and Alec's outer garment a loose linen smock. His plaid he decided to leave behind; it would be missed too soon and besides was nearly as worn as the old kilt he had been wearing when he was found in the snow. He had not worn the poor tattered thing at Eilan Donan but had kept to the seaman's breeches the hunters had not seen fit to rob him of. The breeches were far more comfortable for working at the boats.

Money he could not hope for. He doubted if any used it in this barbarous place. Torquil himself might visit civilisation from time to time. He had been absent on two occasions since Alec's arrival, but he had been to the island of Raasay and it seemed unlikely he would find any use for coinage there. So Alec continued quietly to prepare and await his opportunity.

It came in the last week of May, a sudden unlooked for explosion of violence in the shape of a large-scale raid on a hamlet near Dornie on the far side of an inlet of the loch.

The raid was mounted, as it had to be, by boat across the water. Alec was put in charge of the fleet to see each craft was filled with men and their weapons, with oars to propel them and warps to secure them on landing. He was ordered into the last boat, the sailing longship, in which the constable himself embarked. Alec was to sail this vessel to the head of the fleet, lead the other boats to the point of landing, then stand off to see the men get ashore before going in with Torquil and his particular bodyguard of four.

When the orders for the raid first went out Alec had no idea of the cause of it. But a few words with Mistress Biurnag told him it was a serious matter.

The old woman was in tears.

'Ill work! Ill work!' she cried to him. 'They will kill and burn! I spoke to him but he threatened me. His devil hath him by the hair and will not let him go till this dreadful night be ended.'

'A short night!' Alec told her. ''Tis near midsummer. The sun in these parts seems never to go down. Surely the folk will take to the trees? They will see us coming and run for it, will they not?'

She shook her head, too overcome with fear to speak.

'I am to marshal the boats,' Alec told her. 'We are to start at sundown, but it is not dark. As I said they will see us coming. Though there be no moon there is but a gentle breeze from the head of the loch and no cloud.'

At his first words Mistress MacRae looked at him with horror. But as he went on telling her the orders he had been given she got to her feet and began to search in one of her big chests. When he finished she turned to him and he saw that she held a sheathed dirk very similar in size to the one he had found and kept.

'I do wrong to arm thee,' she said in Scots, 'but I'll no see a braw young lad butchered by yon fiends wi'out a chance to defend himsel'. Take this to thy comfort. See thou use it not save in service of thine own life. And God be wi' thee, my poor boy.'

The Lord be wi' thee too, mither,' Alec said, putting an arm round her, and stooping put back the grey hair from her forehead and kissed her gently. 'And all my thanks. This is my life a second time ye hae gi'en me. If I never see thee more after this night, remember my gratitude.'

She looked at him steadily and he returned her look.

'Go wi' God,' she said and turning resumed her seat and took up her knitting pins.

So Alec entered on his part in the raid with a certain dread but a very clear determination. When he heard Torquil tell his four guards the prime reason for their action his intention became more firm still.

For the expedition was to be an act of revenge. The constable had sent some hunters to bring in a bullock from the pasture beyond Dornie. It was to be driven to the waterside, slaughtered there and brought off by boat to provide fresh meat for the garrison, whose winter stores of salted fish and flesh had long

since run out while it was now considered to be a close season for venison. On arriving at the lochside with their prize the men had been met by a flight of arrows from angry farmers hidden nearby. They were to be taught a lesson for their audacity.

Alec had heard of the incident, but since no one had been seriously hurt, and though the bullock had been abandoned before slaughter and ran away, he had thought no more of it.

Torquil, it seemed, had brooded on what he chose to consider a mortal personal insult and a wrong to Eilan Donan.

As Alec listened he was filled with a cold anger greater than any he had known before. The fact of his own utter powerlessness increased rather than subdued it.

The boats arrived at the shores beyond the creek in practised silence and dread efficiency, the rowers judging their pace accurately so that they rested on their oars for the run in. There was no splashing, no shouting. The whole deadly rout moved ashore leaving one man with each craft to tie its painter to any suitable rock or stout tree stump. Then they followed their companions across the rough foreshore.

The constable gave Alec this task for the sailboat before he moved away with his particular four villains. But he also ordered him to see that the rest of the moorings held and to keep an eye on the fleet until the party came back.

As usual Alec nodded obedience; this time it suited him very well. He did indeed see that the boats were well tied up, but he arranged a knot for the sailboat's painter that could be slipped in an instant and he took the smallest of the rowing craft and fastened it to the stern of the large boat with its oars laid down in the bottom ready for use. Finally he made the sailboat's jib sail ready to hoist and very lightly tied, for the wind was still the smallest of airs off the land. Then, treading carefully, with Mistress Biurnag's dirk in his hand and his own knife in its sheath at his belt under his smock, he went up the bank in the tracks of the fighting men.

At first it was too dark to see them but almost at once a torch flared and another until a larger burst of flame showed where a rick had been fired, next a bothy and then, amid rising yells and more distant screams of fear and pain, a whole series of fires lit up a scene of destruction and carnage that stopped Alec in his tracks as he understood the enormity of Torquil's revenge.

The whole hamlet, not only the poor hovel of the offending husbandman, was ablaze. Every man, woman and child that had not already abandoned all and fled, was to be put to death. The wild men of Eilan Donan were at work upon it, making their hideous bonfires and falling upon the wretches who fled from the blaze with their long spears or their sharp knives.

Alec turned about, sickened, furious, but aware again of his impotence. He saw beside him, so intent upon the hideous actions of his men that he himself was not observed, Torquil with his bodyguard.

They do not run from this blaze,' the constable shouted, pointing to the nearest hut that was well alight.

'It was here the knave defied us,' one of his men said.

'See!' another cried. They have loosed their litter, thinking to hold us off while they burn themselves, but the brats make away to safety.'

'After them!' Torquil yelled. 'Let not one of that brood escape!'

The four, baying like hounds, leaped forward. The poor children, three in number, ran this way and that, confused by the noise and the red light of the fires, the acrid smoke and falling sparks. If they had gone back into the woods behind the hamlet they might have got away, but they were too young and terrified to follow the plan their father had ordered. Two of them were caught and slain at a little disstance from the sheltering trees. The third, the smallest, ran desperately back towards his burning home. Alec saw the swiftest of the bodyguards catch him up, seize the wretched mite by an arm and a leg and fling him shrieking into the flames.

'Back to his sire!' screamed Torquil, beside himself with evil joy at the sight. 'Bravely done! Back—'

'To thy master in hell!' The dirk took the constable from behind and he fell, choking, kicking, coughing up his life-blood as he died.

Alec plucked out the knife and ran, back across the field, down the slope to the shore, where he flung the dirk in a long arc out into the loch. He came to the sailboat, cast off the painter, gave the craft a great shove, leaped on board and with a powerful thrust on the tiller turned her round, so that she slid away from the other boats. He left her to the tide which was on the ebb while he sprang forward to pull up the small foresail. It

filled at once and getting back to the tiller Alec set the boat across the loch. The current ran more swiftly as he made away from the land. The small boat was following, held by its tow. On shore the noise, the flames, the martyrdom continued. Against his better nature Alec prayed fervently that it might continue just long enough to secure his escape.

Chapter Three

His impious prayer was heard, or at any rate overlooked, Alec decided when, calmer now, he sailed crab-wise in the ebbing tide at the middle of the loch. The kernel of his plan had succeeded, but Torquil's death had not originally formed a part of it.

He had no regret for dispatching that fiend. He believed literally Mistress MacRae's account of the constable's satanic possession. It was an accepted phenomenon. He had been brought up by his bigoted, puritanical father more in the fear of hell than in any promise of heaven. Though he himself trusted more to the love of God than to fear of the Devil to help him to salvation he had never questioned the power of the Evil One. So now, far from considering himself a murderer for the second time, he began to compare the two victims in their several wickedness and had almost begun to feel a certain complacence as he floated comfortably towards the Sound of Sleat when he recalled his present position and considered how he was to escape from it.

Torquil's slain body would be discovered, he himself would have disappeared. Those two facts could not fail to be put together. And so a fiercer hunt for him would be made than he had planned. The sooner he set about the second phase of his escape the better.

Moving forward in the sailboat he loosed the stays and halliards, pulled down the mainsail and unstepped the mast. Together he bundled the lot overboard. Next he ripped up the little foresail, still flapping in the wind and left the shreds festooned about the bows. Then, lifting out the tiller he cut loose the rudder and let both drift away.

The sailboat was now helpless. It and its various gear would presently drift back up the loch on the flood. The men of Eilan Donan would find some or all of it and conclude, he hoped, that he had come to grief or been attacked by pirates. If there had been a fair wind he would have sailed away and on down the coast. But these light airs were useless for that purpose. It hurt

him to destroy the work of so many weeks. He thought regretfully of old Nial. But he understood what he was doing and as he jumped over into the small boat, sat down and took up the oars, he set out for the far shore of the loch with fresh hope of success.

It was now nearly slack water and so not difficult to make up the distance down the loch he had lost on the tide. He went in under the shelter of the hills as quickly as he could and presently came into the little bay where he and Nial had so often taken their work. Arrived there he set about hiding the boat. The rocks were now all exposed at the bottom of the ebb. He jammed the small craft into a cleft in them and filled it full of stones. He pulled long strands of kelp over it with more stones on top. With luck, he thought, if they came searching here, it would be hidden deep below water at the flood and not revealed as the rocks came out again, until at last it rotted and the fragments floated away.

Working hard, Alec did not realise how clearly he could see what he was doing, until he straightened his back and looked across at the castle. Then he understood. The dawn was upon him. The hills opposite were palely outlined. The fires in the meadows had nearly burned out. And though he could not see any figures moving he knew that before long the raid would be over, the dead constable found and a fresh revenge set on foot.

He turned from the shore, cursing the short summer night and the rising sun that cut short his active escape. He had been too long about the boats. He had meant to be clear over the hill and down to Glenelg before daybreak. But this had miscarried. He climbed to the broch with the sky above the hill lightening all the time from grey to palest gold to a flush of pink on the little clouds in the east. Before he stooped to the doorway of the broch and dived into the hollow of the great double wall he looked back and saw the sun flash from the rocks on the mountain above Eilan Donan.

His bundle was lying undisturbed where he had hidden it, which proved that no searching hands had explored its hiding place. Mistress MacRae had no doubt spoken truly of her own generation when she told him of the superstitious fears that kept visitors away from the ancient stronghold. All the same he did not believe that such an obvious hiding place as the broch

would be immune from search when the object was to take the murderer of the chieftain's substitute. His breath caught in his throat when he remembered the scenes of horror he had witnessed during the night.

Nevertheless, with his usual energy and good sense Alec soon controlled his dread and turned his mind to the next stage of his escape. It seemed clear to him at first that he must remain hidden for the hours of daylight, not venturing to expose his familiar large person to any view from Eilan Donan, nor himself, a stranger, to the folk upon this south side of the loch, who might well report his unwelcome presence.

But how could he stay in the broch until dark when the men of the castle would certainly search the hills and woods, even if they avoided his ancient refuge? Once spread across the countryside he might expect to find an avenger behind every rock and tree, lurking, following on silent feet preparing the crippling blow that would deliver him up again as helpless as on the winter morning in the snow. But this time not to Mistress Biurnag's gentle care but to a savage death.

It was a situation he could not resolve by reasonable calculation. From the doorway of the broch he could see very little. Even from its summit there would be no view of the loch nor of the castle on its causeway. He had looked often enough from those turrets and from the water of the loch and had never caught a glimpse of the grey stone tower where he now hid. He could judge the time only by the sun and reckon up solely from his seaman's knowledge how long it would be before the hunters and their hounds would be swarming up from the beach to seize him.

Their hounds! Alec shivered when he thought of this added, very deadly danger. The dogs at Eilan Donan were an ill-cared-for, mangy, mongrel lot, but they were trained to follow scent and fierce enough under such masters to threaten dangerous wounds.

But quick on his sudden fear Alec thought of a remedy. Both that and a plan for his immediate move, for the two went together. He was hungry now and very tired but he dared not eat nor rest though his bundle promised both stored food and warmth. Instead, he fastened the bundle to his back and with his hands searched about and found the remains of the vixen's lair,

deserted by the whole fox family in disgust at his frequent visits.

With the strong-smelling leaves, grass tussocks and old excrement held in both hands Alec wriggled out of the broch on all fours, crawled along the faint remains of animal tracks in the dewy turf, laying the fox scent as he moved, until he came to the side of the burn, when he smeared some on the stones in the stream and laid the rest on the far shore.

After that he took to the burn himself, first washing his bands and clothes clean, then stepping from pool to pool in long strides as fast as he was able, all the time listening for any sound of oars or howls of men or beasts. None came to him. The burn narrowed, its outline grew confused, at last it ended or rather he reached its beginning where a little spring spurted from a cushion of moss between two tree trunks.

From this point the hill flattened and presently began to drop into a valley, still clothed in fir and birch with a deep layer of dead branches and matted undergrowth to check his progress. When he stood still all was silent: in this dark and secret wood even the birds made no song. Weak from the long night's work, faint from lack of sleep and his growing hunger, Alec plunged on. No one could move silently in this place with such a brittle, tangled footing. He had heard no sound so presumably no one had heard him. But fear still drove him forward, his unquenchable purpose still upheld him. Only when the ground levelled again and the trees thinned and solid grassy earth helped his slow steps forward did he stand again to listen.

Again the silence came round him like a heavy curtain cutting him off from the world. He was not pursued and ahead of him the open valley stretched, sunlit, sparkling, with a thread of blue smoke behind a clump of thick bushes about a half mile distant. A narrow track led down the centre of the valley. It came, Alec saw, from the hill behind him, no doubt the continuation of the way that led up from the loch side, avoiding the broch. If he had taken this path instead of his elaborate and exhausting way among the trees, he might have passed this spot an hour or more ago.

He was inclined to curse his excessive caution as he forced himself on towards the plume of smoke. But he had not gone above half the distance when he realised how unfit he now was for any human encounter, even a friendly one. He sank down

behind a spreading bush of broom from where, well hidden, he could see both the winding track and the trees through which he had struggled. Almost at once, against his will, he fell asleep.

He woke, as suddenly, some hours later, with the sun high above him, striking hotly through his closed eyelids. He started up, seeing the whole world as a tossing red mass. When his vision returned and he knew he was still hidden behind the broom in the pleasant valley he first thanked God for his continued safety, then unfastened his bundle and ate some of the bread he had stored there. It was dry and hard but he chewed steadily, only regretting the burn at the broch that had so often refreshed him. He was minded to ask at the place, farmstead or hovel, from which the smoke in the distance still mounted, but he decided against this. If the pursuit he still expected came over the hill the men would ask for news of him and would get it no doubt. Whether true or invented the men of Eilan Donan would get a positive answer promptly. So it had better be a false one. He had better travel on with all speed and unseen.

It was late that same afternoon when Alec came to the shore of the Sound of Sleat, at a spot from which he saw, after a cautious approach, that boats moved to and fro across the narrow waters. He had heard of a ferry that worked between this place and Kylrhea on the Island of Skye. He determined to cross over if he could do so without risk. The shores of the mainland at this point were steep, as were those of Skye opposite. He had thought vaguely he might steal a boat to make the crossing, but to carry out such a plan in such a forbidding spot was not promising.

So presently, when the ferry did arrive to take on an assembled small group of persons, Alec stood among them, modestly keeping his distance and enough space about him to make a sudden escape if such should be necessary.

The ferry boat arrived; a rickety, flat-bottomed barge, with a platform amidships on which baggage, produce and even livestock could be placed, with the passengers standing fore and aft, while the craft was winched over across the Sound on a great continuous iron chain operated from either landing stage.

The ferryman came ashore to direct the travellers. The first three caused no trouble. Their bundles were small, easily stowed. In front of Alec there was an elderly man holding by a

halter a highly suspicious she-ass that had a loose foal at foot. When the man stepped forward, dragging the unwilling animal towards the platform on the boat, the foal sprang away up the hard. The ass planted her feet, drew in her neck. The old man stopped, the ferryman shouted. The foal came back to its mother and began to nuzzle for milk.

During the argument that followed Alec waited patiently. He did not know if he was expected to pay for his passage nor if that was so, how much. He had no money and could only give a material object in exchange, perhaps his spoon or his drinking horn. This might arouse suspicion and deny him his passage. Time was passing and at any moment shouts, perhaps a flung spear, might herald the arrival of his enemies.

So he waited, outwardly patient, inwardly seething. The argument went on in flowing Gaelic, much of which Alec did not understand. But he did gather that the ferryman insisted the ass must embark willingly together with its foal and the pair stand quietly on the platform during the short voyage. The old man repeatedly explained his difficulty. He could not force the ass to move without her young and he had no control of this nervous infant.

Alec saw his opportunity, a means both of ending the argument and securing his passage.

'If ye'll allow me to take the little one,' he said in his imperfect Gaelic, 'no doubt the dam will follow.'

Without waiting for permission he grabbed the foal, lifted it off its feet, in spite of its kicking and squealing and strode with it to the platform, still holding it in his arms.

The result was violent, but successful. The she-ass started forward, nearly dragging its owner off his feet. It leaped to the platform, the whole barge rocking under the impact. The ferryman followed, pushing the old man before him. The other passengers stretched willing hands to steady those on the platform. The winchmen on Skye, seeing the ferry's complement embarked, bent to their task and with shouts of alarm and encouragement, hysterical brays from the ass and renewed squeals from the foal, the unseaworthy vessel set out on its precarious journey.

Since this day was as mild and windless as the one before, with a flat sea and only the incoming tide to set the barge aslant

its course, the crossing was achieved in safety. Alec led the way to the shore still carrying the foal, which he set down hastily when he heard shouts and laughter behind him. The ass had broken away from her master when she saw her offspring again retreating a prisoner and calling for help. She plunged at Alec, who saw his peril just in time to step out of her way. The laughter was renewed. The foal, reunited with its dam, ran under her again to suckle, but she pushed it off and led the way soberly up a narrow steep track to a clump of rough grass where she stopped to graze as if nothing whatever unusual had occurred.

'I thank thee heartily for thy prompt aid,' the old man said to Alec. He had an open bag of coins in his hand. 'Ye will take the fare for the crossing from me.'

Alec made a faint protest before giving way gratefully, as he had to do if he was not to reveal his penury.

These others have sworn ye are a MacRae and on no proper errand?' the old man went on in a lower voice.

That am I not,' Alec answered quickly and raising his voice said, 'There be tall men in other parts of the land, not only beside Loch Duich. I came up the coast from Mallaig and Hourn. I am a fisherman, a seaman. I would find me a ship in Skye to go south again.'

The ferryman had drawn close, together with the other passengers. The winchmen also left their station to join the little crowd.

'Fisherman, say'st, Seaman? Aye, 'tis very possible,' they murmured.

Others joined in the comment.

'Ye saw how he held the foal?'

''Tis a ninny, by the looks of it. A strong little cross-bred.'

'Firm as a rock he stood on that rickety old stage—a seaman, if ever I saw one.'

'Make up to Kinloch, lad, behind the hills, and follow the river back to the Sound, then over to Oronsay. There be fishers come and go there among the Isles.'

Alec asked the ferryman to repeat this advice, for he had not taken it all in. But a voice from one of the passengers called out, 'Not a MacRae? I think the man lies! Are not those thy kinsmen that yell and leap on the hard to get a crossing?'

Alec said quickly, ‘No kinsmen, I swear it by the Holy Cross! Mine enemies, who would have my life!’

A heavy sigh, almost a groan, went up from the travellers. The old man moved away to his ass, seized her halter and tugged her into action. Two others set off behind him up the track. The winchmen ran to their machine to make it fast against the efforts of those on the farther shore. But the ferryman and the remaining passengers closed about Alec.

‘I would not embroil ye in my quarrel,’ he said steadily, wondering if they meant to deliver him to Eilan Donan or would help his further escape. It seemed unlikely they would let him find his own way out of this encounter, since they had stopped his immediate departure.

There has been word already,’ the ferryman said. ‘From those fleeing to Kyle word came to Kyleakin of the night’s bloody raid nigh to Dornie. And of a constable, Torquil MacGilchrist, dead on the field.’

Alec said nothing. So the ferryman had known, guessed, all along. He had raised no objection, asked no question, save whether his fugitive passenger were himself a MacRae.

Across the water the two on the hard, tired of shouting and jumping about, had sat down to wait. They were still alone, a fact remarked upon with satisfaction by the passenger who had accused Alec.

‘If ye are no MacRae, lad, what made ye with those pirates of Eilan Donan?’

‘I was their prisoner,’ Alec said. ‘I freed myself.’

The ferryman said, ‘We stand here on MacDonald land. The chieftain protects us and Glenelg too and the barge. There is no danger for us. MacDonald men will come when they hear of this happening. But it would be well ye should not come into the story nor be known to the MacDonald or ye might find yoursel’ a hostage to be bargained over.’

‘Good friends,’ said Alec, ‘give me direction and I will find my way over the hills to the river ye spoke of and so to Oronsay.’

‘lf he hath truly rid us of that devil of Eilan Donan I will even be his guide till we have him safe with the fisherfolk,’ a new voice said. It came from a traveller who had not spoken before. ‘I have a debt to pay in that quarter and will gladly discharge it.’

Amid grunts of approval and good wishes Alec set off with his

new friend, the others moving up from the shore with them until they came to the turn of the road. Alec shouldered his new companion's pack as well as his own so that he could stoop forward and partly disguise his height.

'The MacRaes were puzzled by our movements,' the other man said a little later. 'I looked back as we came to the corner. They were still sitting in fierce argument, it seemed. Still alone. They will not relish waiting there after dark nor anywhere else on that shore and so far from home. They have given cause enough at Glenelg to set the folk at them if they be alone.'

'But the ferry?'

'Will stay here the night, I doubt not and in the morn, with a party of the MacDonaid on board will clear the whole of Mam Ratachan of those murdering wolves, please God.'

'Amen to that,' said Alec, fervently.

By this time the sun, though still bright and hot, was beginning to sink lower in the sky, now and then hidden by the high peaks of the Cuillins that rose in the west beyond the valley where the two were walking.

After the excitements of the ferry crossing, when Alec had put out his strength without thought for his continuing exhaustion and thirst, he now began to weaken, finding the double burden he carried too much for his failing powers. His companion soon noticed his distress and after insisting upon a halt very soon discovered the cause of it. Moreover he had a flask of water with him and some fragments of food, all of which were stale and the water tepid. But he forced them upon Alec with regrets for his former lack of observation.

'We have need to climb the hills presently, if we would avoid Kinloch,' he said. 'I'll not have thee die of privation afore I can reach my home. Nor delay us till we be benighted and suspect to any MacDonald that may be on an errand from Knock or Armadale.'

'What or who be they?' asked Alec, for whom the names held a sinister sound.

'Castles by the Sound for our defence from marauders, whether they be Irish or freebooters or the English in their frigates or simply our unfriendly neighbours.'

Alec said nothing but put up an inward prayer that he might be delivered safely from this land of wasps and hornets where

warfare was the rule and comfortable peace as rare as famine was frequent.

When his strength was partially restored, Alec's new friend led him on after relieving him of the extra bundle he had carried this far. In later life Alec tried to retrace their journey over the hills in his mind. But without a map or chart of any kind, without another visit to those parts, a project he never for a moment entertained, it was impossible. He remembered a gruelling walk at a forced pace across heather, round boggy moss, over scree, among rocks, until at last, in the hollow of a hillside, his guide and companion halted beside a small hut at whose door he knocked. After an interval and an argument conducted in such rapid Gaelic, in such low voices that Alec did not understand a word, the door was opened and they passed into a dark interior where only a glowing brazier showed that there were other inhabitants beside the man who had let them in.

But his memory of the hospitality he found in that poor hovel remained with him in heart-warming clarity for the rest of his life: more food and drink, hot and satisfying this time, and a pile of dry heath to sink into afterwards; no questions asked, but in answer to his own demand to know the reason for such trust and kindness the full and dreadful story of his guide's ruin at the hands of the MacRae. The poor man had lost his farmstead, his cattle and his crops. His wife and children had sunk in Loch Alsh as he had tried to take them to safety on a raft of logs. He had been picked up himself, half-drowned, but the others had vanished. Even their bodies never reappeared.

The terrible story kept Alec awake until the others settled themselves for the night, but after that he slept without moving until the sun was well up in the sky. His friend of the day before had gone, but left a message to the effect that he was bound himself for Oronsay and if Alec made his way to that island he would find the fisherfolk prepared for his arrival.

So, with a bowl of porridge inside him and a mixed tale of instructions to direct his steps, Alec went on his way again, his bundle lighter of the drinking horn and the small platter that he had pressed upon his hosts, much to their delight. He found his way to the river some miles to the east of Kinloch and before noon came to its mouth, with the island of Oronsay hugging the

shores of Skye upon the southerly horizon.

Chapter Four

Alec found a fleet of six fishing boats riding at anchor off Oronsay, seemingly deserted by their crews. But when he made his way to the shores of the Sound a young boy who was throwing stones into the water left his game to approach him.

'Be you the fisherman my father is told to expect?' the lad asked in his soft Celtic speech.

'I reckon so,' Alec answered. 'A friend told me yestereen he would speak for me here at Oronsay.'

'Aye. Then I think you be he,' the boy said gravely. 'A tall man with a red beard and rough, outlandish clothing.'

His eyes were wary in case Alec resented this impudence. But when he saw the stranger's mouth widen in a grin and his blue eyes glint with laughter he burst into a shrill laugh himself.

'Then follow me,' he said. 'My father hath need of a strong man for the nets. He sails on the tide this night if the wind serves.'

The business was soon settled. The fisherman, who was a MacDonald, had lost a man in a storm a week ago, a northern storm that Alec remembered for its wild ferocity. It had dealt some damage to the boats at Eilan Donan, though the castle was a fair distance inland and protected by high hills from northern gales. MacDonald had been caught in Cuillin Sound and had with difficulty managed to creep into Loch Seavaig near Elgol where he lay three days until the storm blew out and he could return home to Oronsay. His lost crew's body had been found cast upon the island of Soay at the mouth of Seavaig.

Alec, without giving exact detail of his real reason for fleeing Eilan Donan, made it plain to the skipper that he must leave this part of the Highlands and not return.

'That suits me well,' MacDonald answered. 'I have a brother on the Isle of Mull who will join me there. We take our catch to Oban and according to the weather make another trawl by Islay and the North Channel.'

'I would go south,' Alec said, 'into England, but to the western parts there.'

‘So.’ MacDonald gave his new crewman a steady look that reminded Alec of when he first became a fugitive and Captain Smithson engaged him in his brig *Sunflower* in the Pool of London.

But, as before, he was asked no further questions about his flight, neither the cause of it nor his detailed plans for his future. The trawler master merely said, ‘Thy name, laddie?’

Alec hesitated. At Eilan Donan he was known as Jock Bridie, because that was written in the testimonial to his seamanship, written by Captain Smithson, and that he had shown to the constable to prove his ability. So as Jock Bridie he would be sought by the MacRaes around Loch Duich. But on Skye so far he had given no name and might use his own.

‘Alec,’ he answered, but gave no surname, only adding, ‘I learned the craft off the eastern shores.’

‘So,’ MacDonald answered again, seeming satisfied. ‘Then come aboard, Sandy, and show me thy competence. I have a mended mainsail to bend on and make ready. If the wind sets fair we leave at sundown.’

‘At slack water on the flood,’ Alec suggested, to show that he understood the meaning of this.

The skipper nodded. As Alec soon found, the trawler master spoke as little as possible, but gave his orders clearly in a carrying voice and though not overbold in his manoeuvres never hesitated to take quick decisions when these were needed.

The vessel he now went aboard was well found and reasonably ship-shape. There were two men already there, one elderly with white hair and a lined brown face, the other not much older than the boy who had met Alec upon his arrival. No wonder MacDonald had engaged him so easily, Alec thought. With these two weak members as crew he could hardly have ventured to sail. He was amazed that they had survived the storm when a presumably stronger man had been lost overboard.

As if the skipper understood his thoughts MacDonald said, ‘Ye see how I was placed. Geordie was lost when we gybed in the storm and the boom struck him, in the neck as it went across.’

Feeble hands on the tiller, Alec wondered, or on the main-sheet? Perhaps neither. In a confused sea such accidents could happen through no man’s fault, but simply by the will of God

according to His inscrutable purpose. So he bowed his head to convey his awe and acceptance of the Divine Will and waited to be given his orders.

Until they sailed Alec was kept busy preparing the ship for the voyage. When the sails were in order, the halliards ready to pull them up, the sheets run through the blocks and coiled down, the three members of the crew were set to lay the trawl ready in the stern to cast overboard when the word was given.

All being now prepared, they were called on shore to the master's small cabin, where a substantial and to Alec very welcome dinner awaited them. He had eaten nothing since his early breakfast and felt he had not yet made up for his fasting on the previous day and the night of the raid.

As on that night a gentle off-shore breeze came up at sundown. It funnelled along the Sound of Sleat as it had done in Loch Duich, but this time blew in a southerly direction, much to MacDonald's delight. He waited until the tide, just on the turn, began to swing his trawler round to face the stream and the wind. Alec pulled up the foresail while the old man and the boy got up the anchor, then backed the sail to turn the boat from the land. Next, springing to the mast at a word from the skipper, he pulled up the mainsail, hardened the sheets of both sails and they were away into midstream before the two hands had managed to secure the anchor in its chocks and dispose more or less neatly of the chain attached to it.

MacDonald's face softened a little from satisfaction at the easy success of their start, but he said nothing as Alec moved aft to hear his further orders. He stared ahead of him as the trawler gathered speed, the wind still behind them. It was not until the light began to fade that he called to the old man to set up a lantern at the bows and bring another aft to where he stood.

'We should pass Armadale within the hour from now,' he said. 'Take the tiller and keep the course. We must clear the Point of Sleat before we let down our net.'

He moved away forward to speak to the old man and the boy, leaving Alec to guide the boat, an easy task with that light but sufficient wind, on the beam now as the Sound widened to the open sea and a truer breeze filled their sails.

It was quite dark when they cleared the coast of Skye and began to trawl. The net went out smoothly but its weight, even

without a catch, slowed up the vessel considerably so that it seemed to Alec that they scarcely moved. MacDonald however took this as a matter of course. Nor was he put out by the darkness. All night they trawled between and around the islands of Rhum and Eigg and Muck. At dawn they were just south of the last small shape of the trio and moving slowly west with the promontory of Ardnamurchan about five miles distant.

MacDonald had sent the boy forward to make porridge on a little brazier fed with peat they kept in partial shelter under the counter in the bows. The old man stood by the mast staring out seawards, where a bank of clouds began to move before a newly risen north-westerly breeze. Presently he raised a hand and pointed.

'Aye, Tam,' the skipper called to him. 'Wind's backed to nor'-west at last. We'll maybe get a bit blow to help us.'

'Nay, master,' Tam shouted. '' Tis not the wind I'm showing ye. Look to yon craft in the lee of Rhum. They be none of ourn. Nor fishing, neither.'

MacDonald looked, frowned, yelled for the boy.

'Up the mast, lad! Tell me what ye see!'

The boy wasted no time; his report was forbidding. Five ships, three of them pirates, he thought, with two prizes in their, midst, creeping along in the lee to stay hidden till the rising sun through a misty glare should hide them further. He scrambled down to the deck and stood panting, his face full of fear,

MacDonald called Alec to stand by the mainsheet as he gybed his boat to a standstill. He had no need to give orders for the next move. They must get in the catch and run for it if they had time. If not they must abandon the net and run.

Hauling, heaving, panting, the four men tugged and lifted. As they got a good purchase the net came up more easily, fish spilling out into the deep bottom amidships in a slippery, gleaming mass of silver iridescent scales; flapping, jumping bodies everywhere. The fish were all over them, burying their feet, tripping them as they tried to move, still hauling, still gathering in the folds of the great net.

At last the flood of fish ended, the net grew suddenly slack, sending Alec with his last great pull falling backwards into the seething heap. MacDonald leaped to the tiller and flung it across.

‘Wear ship!’ he bawled, and his crew, still panting, struggled to push the boom across so that the sail filled and they began again to move.

Perhaps just in time, Alec thought, perhaps not, as he gazed over the stern at that distant group, no longer creeping in the lee of Rhum but running out where they caught the wind, freshening now all the time. He saw with relief that they themselves had made a square drift while they struggled with the catch, partly because the wind, being free, had reached them with more force than those skulking ones, partly because they were being helped by the tide carrying them forward towards the point of Ardnamurchan.

‘Tell me what ye see, Sandy,’ MacDonald ordered, keeping his own eyes on his course towards Mull. ‘Do we keep our distance?’

‘Aye, sir,’ Alec answered. ‘But we lost too much while we took the catch. If we could put on but a couple of knots—’

‘We are before the wind,’ MacDonald answered angrily. ‘I make for yon point to turn into the Sound of Mull. Once round that they will lose sight of us and we may reach Tobermory in safety.’

‘Have you another foresail?’ Alec asked. ‘A larger one?’

‘What use is that, running?’ MacDonald said, his anger growing. ‘Ye see our present sail flaps as it can only do as we run.’

‘And a spar not in use?’ Alec persisted, paying no attention to the other’s objections.

MacDonald shook his head but old Tam caught Alec’s sleeve and pulled him forward. From the recess where the boy, seemingly unhindered by the pile of fish, was again stirring the porridge, the old man pulled a spare foresail and untied a long boathook that was lashed to the vessel’s side. He had understood Alec’s intention and the urgency of their need.

The skipper understood it too when Alec had set the larger sail and with the boathook lashed to the clew had pushed it out on the opposite side to the mainsail. As there was no means of securing the boathook inboard he tucked the end under a cleat at the foot of the mast and held it in place in his strong hands.

Tam stumbled aft to MacDonald, who made no comment at what had been done without his direct orders. He was a fair man and shrewd. He had explained the need for increased speed

to Alec, who had taken action to produce it. And had indeed produced it, he felt almost at once in the increased strain on the tiller. The boat pushed forward through the growing waves that slapped the sides more forcibly, sending showers of spray on board. The dying fish in the deep bottom leaped again in sudden hope, the two sails stiffened into sculptured shapes and very slowly the hulls of the pursuers dwindled as the distance between them grew longer.

In a little more than two hours the point of Ardnamurchan was some five miles away on their beam on the port side and the island of Coll a like distance to starboard. But MacDonald held his course until he drew near to the northern shores of Mull, for he was afraid that when he turned to make his way into the Sound of Mull, he would lose much of the fresh breeze that had helped him and at the same time have to alter the novel sail arrangement that Alec had set up.

But in this he was mistaken. As in the Sound of Sleat the wind funnelled into these narrow waters also, following them round to the entrance of the harbour at Tobermory, where Alec released the foresail and MacDonald rounded up in great style and brought his vessel to against the quay, where Tam and the boy made her fast, while Alec leaned against the mast, rubbing his numbed and stiffened hands together.

It was the skipper himself who brought him a bowl of porridge, made him sit on the combing aft and since he could not yet hold a spoon fed him with his own hands.

'We owe thee more than thanks,' he said. 'Our catch, our ship, our lives most like.'

Though Alec did not understand all the words he could see the sense of them in the skipper's eyes and bowed a formal acknowledgement, saying in his own Scots tongue, 'And my ain life, sir, which I hae no inclination to lose. The fear of death is a fine invigorator.'

MacDonald stared. In his turn he did not understand Alec's form of English, but he saw in his gestures, the graceful bow, the sweeping hand, that accompanied the words, a very different person from the needy fisherman who had contracted to sail with him to Oban. There was a mystery behind this young man's plight, he decided and he had no place in his own life for mysteries, particularly not those of strangers. So he turned away

and calling to Tam and the boy to follow him he led them to one of the row of fisherfolk's cabins that stood behind the quay facing the harbour wall.

Alec understood the skipper's stiff reversal. He too had been suddenly afraid of the rush of feeling between them, but he regretted his self-betrayal. It had been part of his excitement, the relief from real peril, the joy of success. Together, for old Tam and the boy had little part in it after the catch was hauled aboard, MacDonald and he had defeated the best efforts of the enemy ships to capture them. They had shared an outpouring of emotion in which each displayed his inmost self to the other. And he, Alec, in his sudden retreat from this dangerous intimacy had destroyed the best part of his disguise. He followed the three ahead of him, keeping a respectful distance and ready for any adverse move by the sturdy figure in the lead of their small procession.

There was no adverse move, but a hearty welcome, with hand shaking and back slapping. MacDonald's brother was some years younger than the skipper. He had a lively wife and two subdued children, who approached their uncle shyly and ran away out of the house as soon as he had accepted their greeting.

Food, plain and coarse, but abundant, as in Skye, was soon on the table and after all had eaten the skipper had to tell his story, which he did at considerable length with much reference to Alec's strength and resource, which the latter gathered from the frequent glances in his direction. When the tale was done Tam and the boy got up to return to the boat and Alec rose to go with them, but MacDonald stopped him.

'Stay thou, Sandy. Let them go. They have much they can do on board to get us fit to sail again with the catch.'

'Today?' Alec asked, moving from foot to foot and giving frequent glances at the open door.

'Nay,' said the brother, whose name was Hamish. 'Ye sleep here tonight, brother, and thy crew may guard the catch. Am not I to be with ye down to Oban?'

'And after?'

'My home is here,' Hamish told him.

There was a further discussion while Alec waited, still standing, hoping for leave to go. At last MacDonald turned to him and said, 'Did'st take in what we decided? The seas going

south from Oban by the open route round Jura and Islay and on by the Mull of Kintyre are infested by foreign rogues, so Hamish hath it. I have no arms to repel them. Even with thy newfangled set of my canvas I could not outsail them without I had as good a start of them as we had today. With Hamish's help I'll get me back here from Oban. But if ye would go into England ye must leave us at that place.'

'Would I find another berth there to continue my voyage?' Alec asked, disregarding the threat and warning before him.

The two men consulted again and shook their heads.

'Overland, then?' Alec said, wondering how he could find a way among the manifold tongues of land and numerous sea lochs and inland waters that lay, he understood, between this coast and the western Borders.

Again they shook their heads.

'We will consult them we sell our catch to in Oban,' the skipper said and with that the brothers fell silent and Alec left them to return to the boat where he meant to go over all the gear and make any repairs that needed doing.

He found the vessel surrounded, hidden, assailed, by a grey-white cloud of screaming gulls. Having beaten them off sufficiently to find his way aboard he discovered Tam gutting the catch at lightning speed while the boy threw the offal overboard, attacking with the boathook in a sweeping movement those gulls that flew in too close.

'Have a care, laddie,' Alec cried, as the metal end of the boathook flew past his face. 'I did not hold that spar for six hours to have it gouge out my eyes.'

The boy laughed, apologised, but continued his sweeping, which was indeed very necessary. Alec settled down beside Tam to share the gutting operation. He had learned the skill in his father's boats and had not forgotten it. Tam evidently considered this a better guarantee of his genuineness than any act of seamanship he had displayed on their hazardous voyage. But he said little. Like the skipper he found that words were rarely needed at sea. There was noise enough there from the elements to subdue the chatter of men's tongues. Also he had never had much he wanted to say beyond 'Aye sir' when the master spoke to him.

The next day, with Hamish added to their number,

MacDonald took his catch down the Sound of Mull and through the narrow strait between that island and Lismore to the port of Oban in Argyll. Here the brothers sold the catch for a good price, since it was an ample one and supplies, they learned, had become scarce of late on account of the many attacks from Ireland upon the Scottish fishing fleet.

'But the king whom we never see because he comes not back to his own country, hath sent frigates to beat them off,' they were told. 'They be expected any day. To preserve our boats and subdue our quarrelling clans to the north.'

Alec exchanged significant looks with the fishermen at this. They remembered his difficulty and inquired how to advise him.

'Ye maun tak the coast road to Lochgilphead,' the fish merchant told him in wholly understandable Scots, though he had spoken Gaelic before. 'There ye may find some craft to take ye into the Firth of Clyde, where there be coasters and larger ships trading into England, Ireland, France—where ye will.'

'England and the Channel ports,' Alec told him, smiling. Then added in a burst of confidence, 'My father trades fish on our eastern side—frae Fife.'

'Is that so?' the merchant answered. 'Fife? A wide, cold and treacherous sea, I'm told, Ye'll no be afeared o' these sheltered waters, I'm thinking.'

They both laughed.

'The sea is ever to be feared,' Alec said. 'I fear these many rocks and difficult currents hereabouts. To know them as our skipper here doth and in all weathers is the work of a lifetime.'

'Och, aye,' the merchant said, translating for MacDonald's benefit.

Alec was fed and housed that night and the next morning set out for another long walk. He had a substantial share of the catch money as wages in his pocket and a more worthy bundle than before on his back. The sun was warm and the sea smiled below him and at every ten miles or so small hamlets or little fishing villages broke the monotony of the journey, providing food and shelter, too. On the third day he came to Ardislaig on Loch Fyne, where as Hamish MacDonald had told him he found a boat to take him to the Isle of Bute. At Rothesay he found himself at last looking across the Firth of Clyde, where ships of all sizes passed to and fro across the water from the great port of

Glasgow.

Chapter Five

It took Alec three days to find a ship to his liking that would carry him south into England and bring him to Bristol. The first of such that he discovered rejected him, being suspicious of his somewhat wild appearance added to his great stature. Also of the state of his testimonial from Captain Smithson of *Sunflower*. The second captain he approached could not read but did not wish to disclose this fact to Alec. As the latter was afraid to reveal his own ability in that respect, seeing he wanted a berth as an ordinary seaman, he got no further with this one either. But opposition, as usual, only provoked him to harder effort and the third southerly bound coaster he approached, already loaded with coal from the Lothian mines, was not only short of a crewman, but welcomed Alec's size and evident strength without paying much attention to the testimonial.

'Thy name?' Captain Munro demanded.

'Jock Bridie.'

Alec once more held out the flimsy dog-eared testimonial, on which the words had been worn away at the long-folded creases. But this time, though with several pauses for thought. Skipper Munro gathered the meaning of it, nodded and handed it back. Alec gathered it into its folded shape and stowed it in the small leather bag hanging from his neck.

'I'll tak ye, Jock,' the captain said. '*The Maid o' Dunoon*, lying at the quay yonder.'

'Aye, sir,' Alec answered. 'A right dainty barque she is, too, i' faith.'

'Ye know her, then?'

Alec reddened.

'It was her lines took my eyes before ever I asked for her master,' he said truthfully.

Captain Munro gave a loud laugh.

'Either ye're a practised seaman or a great courtier,' he cried. 'Awa wi' ye, laddie. Aboard an' ask for Mr Ferguson. We sail for Carlisle the night.'

Oleg Ferguson, the mate, was as pleased as his captain to

secure such an apparently stalwart crew. What with the disturbances in the Isles and the troubles following the late Queen Elizabeth's ill-conceived adventures in Ireland, not to speak of smuggling on a large scale from that country, shipping out of the Clyde had been hazardous, unprofitable and lately most unpopular with men who followed the sea. They preferred the eastern ports and the quieter waters of the north-east. So did the mine owners, who could ship their product almost as easily from the Forth as from the Clyde and were finding a rapidly expanding market in London and other prosperous, growing English towns, now forced to use coal in place of the wood cut down for the building of more and yet more craft.

Alec found *The Maid o' Dunoon* a happy ship, well found and well conducted. Both Captain Munro and Mr Ferguson were quick and competent, inclined to severity but very fair where the carrying out of an order laid an extra strain upon a man not quite strong enough to support it with all the smartness they required. It was abundantly clear, Alec found, that the voyage was almost a military operation. In fact during his first hour on board this thought struck him as Mr Ferguson led him round the barque, showed him the holds, loaded now with coal and battened down, the high poop, the position of the captain's quarters under it and of his own forward of the foremast, and between these two locations on either side of the main deck two gun ports with ordinance in position though not run out and the flaps at present closed. As they passed them Alec stopped, pointing.

'We are at war then, sir?' he asked, grinning widely.

'We may be,' Oleg replied. 'It is a risk we run going south. Hast not heard?'

'I hae heard much,' Alec answered, 'and had a wee experience lately, fishing near Skye.'

'Indeed?'

Mr Ferguson was not interested. Alec remembered hearing from MacDonald about the narrow strait between Stranraer and Larne in Ireland, opposite, and the dangers attending a passage there. But he also remembered his humble position in *The Maid o' Dunoon* and did not try further to relate his adventure.

But the rumours and warnings were true, he found, though the barque he served did not, to his regret, take a part in the

actual fighting. They had come, without incident, past the narrow straits and were making for the Point of Ayr at the northern tip of Man, when the look-out called that an unusual number of masts showed upon the horizon in the direction of the Solway Firth. As they drew on, keeping their course, it became apparent that a running battle was taking place and that *The Maid o' Dunoon* was heading into the midst of it. That this was a serious fight was made clear by the bright flashes, puffs of smoke and faint claps like thunder from the pursuers, who were evidently closing with the pursued.

Captain Munro gave instant orders to alter course towards the Scottish coast. He also commanded Alec to stand by the starboard ports to man the guns if need be.

This he did with much inward misgiving, for he knew nothing at all of firearms. During his youth and his years in London, though fighting guards and army troops had carried such weapons, gentlemen relied on their swords, merchants on their authority. But he soon found Mr Ferguson at his side, ready to instruct him, having dealt with those members of the crew who had been resetting the sails upon the new course.

'Do we run them out, sir?' Alec said, patting the gun barrel beside him and eager to see it perform.

'If we get the order,' Oleg Ferguson answered, smiling at the young man's eagerness. He turned to a stocky member of the crew who stood just behind him.

'Mr Bell is our gunner and will instruct ye.' He turned away, leaving the two together.

Bell said, 'They be the English frigates we've bin promised this twelvemonth.'

'And their prey?' Alec asked, for it was becoming plain that the two leading ships in the fight were making for Man or for Ireland, but looked as if they would reach neither. Much of their sail and rigging had been shot away. The second in line was falling far behind and as they watched the leading frigate fired again, the shot struck the mainmast which toppled and fell plunging half overboard in such a way that the starboard decks were forced under water and in a short time the vessel was stationary, sinking fast.

The frigate that had destroyed her with that broadside swept on, keeping up her pace to capture the foremost prey. As the

men on *The Maid o' Dunoon* watched they saw the second frigate, instead of stopping to pick up survivors from the sinking enemy, not only alter course to avoid her, but send men aloft to cram on extra sail.

'God's life!' cried Captain Munro. 'The blood-thirsty bastards! Those are no men-o' -war but some poor fools with silks or spirits from France by way of Man. They have no guns. No fair fight, by God! Shame on them, English dogs!'

'Better to drown than lie in an English gaol and hang by process of English law,' said Mr Ferguson bitterly. He had joined the captain on the poop deck when the action had nearly gone past them and it was clear they would not have to defend themselves from either side.

Captain Munro, still blazing with fine Scottish indignation, began to give fresh orders. His crew, led by Oleg Ferguson and now including Alec, swung the spars and hauled the ropes to bring *The Maid* about on a fresh course that would take her directly across the position of the sinking smuggler, now low in the water.

As they drew near Alec saw a few heads bobbing around the floating upper half of the mizzen mast that had been split away by the same burst of shot that had felled the mainmast. But before they had reached the spot the doomed ship gave a final lurch, dipped forward and plunged out of sight, with a last despairing yell from her captain who had stayed aboard her to the end.

The yell was echoed by the bobbing heads whose number was diminished to two by the final death plunge of their vessel, that had washed them from their hold on the spar. Nevertheless Captain Munro completed his act of mercy. He brought his ship up into the wind, set down one of the boats and sent Oleg and Alec and the gunner to bring in the two survivors if they still lived.

The boat, rowed with vigorous strokes by Alec and Bell, shot across the choppy sea to the spar, guided by Mr Ferguson, who, standing in the stern precariously with a hand on the backstay and a foot on the tiller, had kept his eye firmly on those two heads, for there was a constant danger that he would lose sight of them if he took his eye from them for as much as a second.

'Avast there!' he yelled suddenly, leaping down to grip the

tiller and swing the boat over with such a sudden movement that the spray from a struck wave drenched them all.

Alec, out of breath, leaned over his oar. The gunner, even more exhausted, lay over backwards. They were both roused instantly by a cry from Ferguson.

'We've got them! Jock, ye great oaf, grab that man!'

The little boat rocked up and down in constant danger of capsizing as first one and then the other of the two survivors was hauled on board, to fall shivering, weeping and praying, giving thanks to God for their delivery from drowning, calling down curses on their attackers and crying out their fears for their future in captivity.

Since it was impossible to row with two writhing bodies amidships, Mr Ferguson raised the small boat's sail and soon had her alongside *The Maid*. When it came to getting the two half-drowned wretches on board the barque an unlooked for fact was revealed. One of the two was a Manxman as was expected, but the other was a Scot; who had fallen, he said, from the second frigate as she swept through the drowning crew of the smuggler. And in falling he had struck a jagged piece of wreckage and torn a considerable wound in his thigh.

'Fell?' Captain Munro asked wrily, when Mr Ferguson reported this. 'Or jumped?'

The mate made no answer, but took his skipper to the ship's boat, now on board the barque again. The latter stared at the pool of reddened seawater in the bottom of the boat and then asked, 'Where's the fellow now?'

'Below, sir,' Mr Ferguson answered. 'Yon Jock Bridie hath some knowledge o' wounds, it seems. I'll no contradict him. A fine seaman, knowledgeable beyond the ordinary. He could tell us much I reckon, that it would be best we'd not hear.'

Seeing *The Maid o' Dunoon* was now proceeding on the course he had set, Captain Munro went below to the crew's quarters where he found the Manxman, pale and anxious, but quiet now, sitting on the cabin sole by himself and a small group of the crew, off watch, staring down at Alec, who was kneeling beside the rescued Scot, held firmly by two of them.

They made way for the master, who, seeing that Alec had not noticed him, made a sign to them not to interrupt his efforts. He was washing a jagged six-inch shallow cut with salt water that

he had had boiled and partly cooled. The man lay with closed eyes and tight mouth, enduring silently. When the wound was cleansed to his satisfaction Alec brought the sides of it together, clapped on a dressing of clean rags and bound it in place with strips of a stouter material. He then directed his helpers to lift the man into a nearby hammock and got to his feet, finding himself face to face with his captain.

'Well Jock,' Munro said. 'Thou'rt ship's surgeon, master gunner, able seaman and—what else, I wonder?'

He said the last sharply, so that Alec's face grew white with sudden anger at the implied suspicion. But he managed to control the temper that had so often betrayed him.

'I be ignorant of cannon, sir,' he said, forcing himself to speak slowly and respectfully. 'Of firearms altogether,' he added.

'I think ye'd learn fast,' said Captain Munro. He turned to the men about him.

'These fellows we hae ta'en be neither prisoners nor any sort of enemy. We took them frae the sea to save their lives. I am now bound for Whitehaven, where they will be put ashore as their ain masters. I ask no questions and demand no answers. Do ye likewise.'

He kept his word. The engagement between the frigates and the smugglers had taken place just after midday. *The Maid o' Dunoon* reached Whitehaven the next morning, having been becalmed most of the night, much to Alec's relief, for the poor wretch he had tended was able to sleep and by morning professed himself out of pain. He did, indeed, seem able to walk, although with an effort and limping.

Captain Munro gave out to the harbour master at Whitehaven that he was obliged to land two men he had found in the water in danger of drowning. He knew nothing of either, he said, but one seemed to be a Scot, a farmer, who should be returned over the border as soon as possible to his native land where his injury could be seen to by his own people.

After he had spoken the harbour master nodded gravely, indicated that such a fleeting visit upon such an errand of mercy needed no formal acknowledgement and allowed *The Maid o' Dunoon* to leave again at once.

Later that day the captain said to Oleg Ferguson, 'Me-thinks they knew as much of the engagement as we did, The ships, the

pursuit, the discharge of fire, must hae been as clear to them as to ourselves. Dinna ye agree, Mr Ferguson?'

'Aye, sir, I do. And I reckon ye'll no put in to Man, though we hae coal for Ramsey aboard. They frigates maybe saw us at the wreck, maybe no.'

'I'll no risk it,' Captain Munro said. 'Whitehaven had a strange look for yon Manxman. He'll be safe enough there. So, I'm thinking, will be that harbour master's brandy from now on. We'll make down to Barrow, Mr Ferguson, where they expect us the day.'

The mate turned to go but before he reached the door of the captain's cabin, Munro said, 'When Jock Bridie comes off watch send him to me.'

'Aye, sir,' Oleg said, wondering what the captain wanted with Jock and half afraid this valuable new recruit would be taken from him.

He was correct in his misgivings. What Captain Munro had guessed, Alec was able to confirm. The young Scot had indeed jumped from the frigate on purpose, hoping his absence would go unobserved in the excitement of the battle and pursuit. He had not joined the King's Navy willingly; he had been pressed only a few weeks before when on a visit to Carlisle and had been forced to work on board, a farm-hand totally ignorant of the sea, sick most of the time, patrolling around the Isle of Man and the northern coasts of Ireland, often tantalisingly in sight of his native Kirkcudbrightshire. The fight had terrified him, though the Manx smugglers had only pistols to fire as their pursuers closed with them. He was determined to die rather than continue in a life of torment.

The poor lad had told Alec this tale during the first hours of partial relief from the pain of his wound and before he had fallen into a healing sleep,

'He warned me the press gangs are active in every port of consequence, save in Wales, where they take to the hills if an English man-o'-war is sighted off their coasts.'

'I saw ye kept below while we stayed at Whitehaven,' Captain Munro said, looking away.

'Aye, sir. I would get me to the south, to the Channel ports.'

'Then thou'lt need hide thyself at Liverpool, where we stay three days unloading afore coming north again in ballast. But at

Barrow, where we put in tonight if the breeze holds, we shall no find English ships nor English press gangs. The men of those parts are more like to our own race. It is a land of hills and lochs not unlike our ain country, but smaller, both.'

He brought his eyes back to Alec and there was full understanding between them.

'I shall be loth to quit this fine barque,' Alec said slowly, with real regret. 'But ye see sir, how it is.'

'I see well enough,' said Captain Munro sharply, 'that there is much in thy past no man may see with advantage. I canna hae mysteries on my ship, Jock Bridie. So get ye on thy way at Barrow.'

'Aye aye, sir,' Alec said, sighing as he left the cabin.

From Barrow, walking alone, he followed the coast line as nearly as he could until, at the head of Morecambe Bay it went south again. He then struck east, leaving the sharp mountain tops behind and northwards to climb the rounded hills of the Pennines, where small close villages lay in the dales beside narrow sparkling streams. Little inns made him welcome, though the landlords' smiles faded when they heard his unfamiliar speech.

He was reminded of the great journey he had made with his friend Francis Leslie from Edinburgh to London in the newly appointed king's train. They had ridden through York and now he travelled in the north riding of the shire of that name. Well, let them be as unfriendly as they wished; he would not trouble them beyond buying food and shelter for which he could afford a modest sum; he would keep to the hills and travel down the spine of England, enjoying a well-being he had not felt since he fled from the capital and all his former life there nine months ago.

On the fourth day after leaving Barrow Alec was moving along Swaledale when he saw from the drovers' track he was using a collection of beasts with their drovers watering at the stream below him. He decided to go down to inquire his best way south, for he felt he had come east as far as he should but was uncertain how to proceed.

The drovers answered him civilly, advising him to seek shelter before sundown because the mists had been coming up early for the last few days with late frosts following the warmth of the

spring sunshine.

Alec thanked their leader, who then took him a few steps apart from the herdsmen and their ponies to show him where a village lay at a little distance in the dale. As he lifted his arm to point it out his cloak that he wore folded over his shoulder fell away and Alec saw that it was clasped to the jacket beneath by a brooch he instantly recognised. He exclaimed, pointing, 'Friend, where got ye that gaud?'

The drover started back, his hand going to his side.

'Nay,' Alec said. 'Mistake me not. I hae no evil intent. But my great friend, travelling to his hame in Fife hath a tale of succour by certain cattle-men to whose leader he gave—'

'Man!' cried the drover. 'So it was, but he never said his name. A pale young man, but strong. A scholar, he told us, I bound for Fife.'

'Francis,' Alec said, his eyes filling with tears. 'Francis Leslie. It is God's purpose I should meet with ye, for I am just now without purpose or direction. Except ye can help me I as ye helped him.'

'But—but we go up into Scotland and ye ask direction to go south.' The drover laid his hand on Alec's arm. The young man was trembling, he both saw and felt, evidently much distressed. He went on, 'Already the mists are rising from the Swale. We must move our beasts to the shelter of yon knoll where we shall rest the night. Stay thou with us, share our fire and our supper in return for thy tale, which I warrant hath meat in it, Thou'rt in no fit shape to go farther till dawn.'

Alec felt ashamed of his sudden and unexpected weakness, but the sight of Francis's silver brooch, a very familiar part of the latter's dress in their early days at St Andrews, brought back the story of its disposal which he had heard often enough in London when Francis returned from his visit to his father, the laird of Kilessie, near Falkland. It recalled to him in full poignancy the many joys of his lost friendship, those memories he had tried so hard to suppress, but which now flooded back into his mind. Without speaking, with the tears still running down his face, he bowed his head in assent and followed the drover back to the other herdsmen and the waiting cattle.

Later Alec told his tale and the drover listened with sympathy. He was saddened by the wreckage of the young man's hopes to

establish himself in the prosperous business of Master Angus Leslie in the City of London, but applauded his action in killing my Lord Lennox's evil little pimp.

'It grieves me above all,' Alec told him, 'that none now knows if I be alive or dead. Indeed, if they come to hear of my escape from Lennox's men in St Andrews, or maybe conjecture it, for they will know only that I disappeared from thence, they must believe that the hunt ended in my death and an unmarked grave.'

'Could ye send no message since that time?' the drover asked gravely.

Alec then gave him an account of his wanderings, his captivity at Eilan Donan, his escape from there and the reasons for his appearance that day in Swaledale. When he had finished there was a long silence between the two that neither seemed inclined to break.

They were sitting a little apart from the other drovers who had gathered round a large fire to eat their supper and were now preparing to wrap themselves in their cloaks or plaids and stretch themselves on the ground, with their saddles for pillows. Alec watched them, envious in the fresh turmoil of his mind, of the simplicity and certainty of their existence. He said something of this to the drover.

'Not so certain,' the other replied. 'But simple enough, i' faith. There be hazards for us, as for all men.'

'But ye see your purpose plain, not as for me in a mishmash of plans, proposals, risks, doubts and fears!'

'Look'ee,' the drover said, after considering this outburst. 'We take these beasts to market at Jedburgh, then disperse, a few to nearby homes, most back to find more work of the kind. But I go on to Leith this time for a visit to my sister married there these ten years. At Leith—'

'Where Captain Smithson berthed and I left his brig *Sunflower*.'

'Where my sister's man works on the quayside and knows the shipping—'

'And may tell if *Sunflower* still plies with sea-coal to London and if Captain Smithson be still in command of her!'

'Aye,' said the drover, looking away at the fire where his companions were now comfortably settled. He yawned and began to make his own arrangements for sleep.

‘If I were to write a message,’ said Alec, betraying himself against his usual habit, but at once remembering he had in his account of his time in London, already done so. ‘If—’

‘I canna read,’ said the drover, smiling, ‘also I doubt if thou hast the wherewithal to write at this time. So speak thy message, lad. I’ll not forget it.’

“Tis just that Jock Bridie lives, is well would find him a new life at sea from Bristol or the Channel ports.’

‘Jock Bridie,’ repeated the drover. ‘To Captain Smithson of the brig *Sunflower*.’

Alec wondered if he could also mention Captain Henderson of *The Queen of Denmark*, who had taken him to *Sunflower* in the Pool of London on the day of his catastrophe. But there was no certainty of the latter calling at Leith. Perhaps the goodness of God, who had guided him to the drover’s camp, would see to it that Captain Smithson handed on the message to Henderson if they met in London. In that case Francis and Master Leslie would come to know of his survival. But he must leave these things to the will of God. He must not burden the good drover with more names than he could reasonably carry.

‘Aye, friend,’ he said. ‘Smithson of the brig *Sunflower*, from his former crew, Jock Bridie, that sailed with him from London to Leith in the late summer of last year. Whether the message be delivered or no I am much beholden to thee for thy goodness and patience in hearing my grievous story.’

The drover, somewhat confused by the formality of Alec’s speech, merely grunted in reply and turning away from him settled himself to sleep. But Alec stayed for a long time staring at the fire as the logs slowly broke and fell apart, the sparks grew less and the ashes faded.

In the morning the whole party rose early and the sun had barely cleared the mist the drover had foreseen than they were on their way with shouts and whistles, the bullocks lowing, dogs barking and the strong shaggy ponies, not yet shorn of their winter coats, cantering from side to side to round up the stragglers.

Alec watched until the herd disappeared over the next hill, then set out southwards along the track up which the drovers had come. Leaving the Swale behind, he came presently to Wensleydale and the village of Witton, where he found an inn,

the Cow and Calf and there stopped for food.

Chapter Six

Alec had intended simply to have a meal at the inn before continuing his journey south. The pretty, timbered, whitewashed cottage from which the inn sign swung on a short arm above the door was clearly open, though the hour was still early. A man was sweeping the flagstone path that led into the narrow lane across a little stretch of grass. He looked up as Alec approached.

'I have been with the drovers,' Alec said, modifying, his Scottish accent, as he had been wont to do in London, to suit English ears. 'I travel south. I would rest and eat if so be ye can supply me.'

'Go you in,' the man said with a sour look. 'I bain't t' landlord. You mun ask it of Mistress Sugden hersel'.'

Alec knocked at the half-open door, rather afraid he might meet an even colder reception within. But a gentle voice said, 'Enter,' and he found himself in a small dark room, lit by only one tiny window, with a stone-flagged floor, a bench or two and a trestle table running the length of the wall opposite the door.

Mistress Sugden was plump, red-faced and in her middle age, Alec thought. She looked as if she was meant to lead a happy, carefree life but had met with some recent shock or setback that had perplexed and grieved her, drawing lines about her mouth and painting deep shadows under her eyes that suited ill with the roundness of her face and the generous curves of her figure.

He soon found that he was right in these conjectures. Mistress Sugden found him bread and some slices of cold pork and a tankard of mild ale. As she laid these things before him she apologised for the shortcomings of the meal and its service.

''Tis not what we were accustomed to serve,' she explained, 'My husband built up our custom with the good victuals we gave until our Cow and Calf was the best-known inn to travellers from Wensley to Ripon. In the old days, you must know, there was a-many travellers through Witton going to the old abbey of Jervaulx that be now in ruins and the stones of it builded into houses for great folk or taken to prop up the dwellings of the villagers.'

‘Aye,’ Alec said. ‘I mind me well of such a fate the great old religious houses have suffered.’

He was remembering St Andrews and its fallen cathedral, that constant landmark of his earlier youth.

‘But their day was over,’ he went on and smiled, finding himself repeating his fanatical father’s perpetual assertion, though not with the latter’s extravagant fulminations.

‘Happen it were,’ Mistress Sugden said, ‘but a blasphemy to destroy God’s house and I care not who hears me say so. My goodman’s grandfather served travellers to Jervaulx and poor folk who sought succour there. And he kept our good name until he were taken from us—’

She turned away to hide the sudden uprush of her grief.

With no wish to pry Alec said, ‘Then he who sweeps without is—’ He hesitated and continued, ‘He did say he was not the landlord and I must go within—’

‘Eat thy fill and be on thy way,’ said Mistress Sugden, with a stony face. She turned and went out through the door behind the trestle table, leaving Alec, somewhat abashed, to continue his meal in solitude.

But not for long. The door through which Mistress Sugden had gone opened again and a girl came in, carrying some apples in a bowl. She was plump like her mother, but with a smooth face and a clear complexion, the innocent, eyes of youth and a generous mouth held firm by shyness and decorum, but trembling now and then into a half smile.

The skins of the apples were brown and shrunk but in no way diseased. Alec looked at them with surprise. He had not seen fruit of any kind since the autumn of the year before and did not look to see any so early as June.

Seeing his surprise the girl said, ‘We keep them in dry straw in a barrel. They be not handsome but they taste clean and sweet.’

‘Indeed they do,’ Alec said gratefully, biting a piece off one and swallowing it, shrivelled skin and all. The girl laughed, then looked behind her with a hand to her mouth.

‘My moother—’ she began and stopped.

Alec, with the unfinished apple in his hand, rose to his feet, picked up and emptied his tankard and turned to the girl.

‘I am not wanted here,’ he said gently. ‘But no matter. Tell me what I owe and I will pay thee and be on my way.’

Tears rose in the girl's eyes.

'My moother be in trouble,' she said simply, with great dignity, 'for my faither were lost on t' hills in t' snow o' this winter, looking for his sheep that were lost, too. We scarce know where to turn or how to live since—'

She would have left him then but he laid a hand on her arm to keep her.

'Is there ought I can do to help?' he asked, 'Beyond paying for my breakfast?'

Her natural good humour broke through her troubled feelings.

'Nowt save take thy dinner here as well,' she said, giving him her ready smile, that warmed his heart even more than her words.

He agreed to that and went out into the sunshine to find the man he had first seen and question him about his position at the Cow and Calf.

This man, he found, was the late Master Sugden's brother, a younger brother, by a year only. He had been employed chiefly on the smallholding that went with the inn, but since his brother's tragic death in the snow he had conceived the idea that the inn should have gone to him together with the farm and not to the widow, who claimed both for herself as being the true successor.

'lookee,' the man said, passionately, 'happen her brat had been a boy I'd 'ave said nowt agin it. Sugdens 'ave bin 'ere four generations an more. But now—Like enough she'll marry again, she's nobbut thirty and six year. A new name ower t' Cow and Calf! Maybe she'll breed a boy wi' that name! A right shame that'll be—'

'But there is as yet no danger that I see,' Alec said to soothe him.

'An' who the devil might you be, stranger, to see owt? Tha's not bin in t' house above a couple hours.'

'Ay, so,' Alec answered. 'So ye dispute her claim and she keeps ye from the inn, maybe, and who works the farm? Or mayhap there is no farm left since Master Sugden is no longer here to command thy help.'

'I'll take no orders from her,' said the brother sulkily. But he showed his unease by his lack of resentment at Alec's plain speaking. It was evident that his interest in the farm lay far

above his obstinate claim to the inn. Presently he said, ‘Our two hands left us the day after the funeral. They’d not work for any woman, they said. Nor any man that couldna rule a woman. Meaning me, see’st? Wi’ hay standing uncut and no means to bring it in besides, for the pony went too in t’ snow.’

Alec regarded the man with impatience for his poor spirit and complaining, but he pitied Mistress Sugden and more still her daughter, who was as pretty as the mother must have been some twenty years before.

‘I’ll cut your hay for ye,’ he said, ‘if so be there is no more than a man can scythe in a couple o’ days work.’

Sugden was astonished, even suspicious. But the young man looking down at him from his great height with such a sarcastic gleam in his blue eyes, repeated his offer, evidently sincere. It was not a chance to miss.

‘Go thou to Mistress Sugden,’ he said. ‘Tell her thou hast a mind to work on t’ farm. Tell her ah’ll take thee if she hath a mind to it.’

By the end of that day Alec, with stiffening arms and back, was astonished at the impulse that had placed him in his present position. He straightened up, leaning on his scythe, looking at the area of fallen hay on the one side and the acre or more of standing grass on the other. Farm work of the basest, most monotonous kind, when he meant to find the sea again in time for a whole summer’s fishing. What sort of feeble challenge had it been to fasten him to this task?

He did not know. Later he decided it had been the will of God leading him directly towards his future. But at the time he thought it must be the simple beauty of this place, this hamlet, this lush fertile valley after all the harsh scenes he had lived among these last perilous months. Though his body had recovered since his escape from captivity his spirit was not fully healed. Perhaps he was meant to pause here in his wanderings to attempt a cure. Not for one instant did he follow his questioning to its source in the tale young Polly Sugden had told him, or to his pity for her mother’s plight. Certainly it never entered his head to imagine that Polly herself had influenced his choice.

Shaking the sweat from his eyes he gripped the scythe again and bent to the work, determined to finish the row he was

engaged upon before the now sinking sun reached the line of the distant hills.

Alec's example before long produced two shame-faced and needy men to help in the hay harvest. They were the Sugdens' former hired hands who came in fear, for they had been refused at other farms. But they were treated kindly. Master Sugden, still with a view to ownership, received them calmly, sent them off to join Alec and left the latter's example, more particularly his exceptional physique, to spur their efforts.

So the young Scot stayed, well pleased with the hardworking simple folk at Witton, who had rough tongues and to him a strange-sounding dialect, but were honest, good-natured and slow to take offence, though when roused formidable enough. Mistress Sugden fed him well, Master Sugden was as apt to ask his advice on animal matters as to give it and Polly Sugden soon roused in him a genuine, comfortable affection very far from passion, so that her mother's early misgivings on her behalf soon abated. Especially as the gossip in the neighbourhood suggested that young Jock Bridie, who had wasted no time in finding himself a nag for his personal use, spent his free days, when he claimed any, riding into Ripon and it was anybody's guess with what purpose, for he bought no goods there that anyone could see but was always the poorer on his return. Which gossip made the village matrons nod wisely and laugh indulgently, while Polly, whose sensible young head had kept her so far from any false step, began to indulge in romantic fancies, the wilder and more enjoyable since Alec gave them no substance in reality.

But in spite of his satisfaction with his present life the young man became aware before June was out that things were no better in the dispute for ownership at the Cow and Calf. Mistress Sugden's lined face grew more haggard, she was more often closeted with her brother-in-law for long periods and came from these conferences with the marks of tears on her cheeks. Polly, too, seemed anxious, confused, unhappy. Finding the girl alone one day in the small dairy, weeping openly, Alec put a sympathetic arm about her and demanded to know the reason.

Polly was so overcome by his action that she cried all the harder, but at last, having relieved her feelings, she drew away from him and sobbed out, 'Uncle would take t' farm often us and moother says she'd die rather and Ben Flinders is after me but

I'd die afore I'd take him, the sly cur!'

'Who is this Ben Flinders?' Alex asked. He had heard the other causes of complaint many times already, but no mention had ever been made of Polly's suitor.

'Over to Wensley,' the girl answered. 'His faither had a-many sheep on t' hills and would take our farm an he could. Moother could keep the old Cow if she could marry me to Ben. Then uncle's nose ud be out o' joint and serve him right. But I'll not have Ben. I'll die first, the sneaky villain.'

There seemed to be no answer to this, so Alec left the girl to her cream-skimming. But he contrived to find Mistress Sugden alone one hot afternoon, sitting in the shade of her mulberry tree stripping dried lavender from the stalks to put in little bags for her linen. He lowered himself to the grass beside her and after making a few complimentary remarks upon her many skills and those of her daughter, the flood gates of confidence opened and the good-wife poured out her problems.

The gist of it was much as Polly had described. Master Sugden considered himself his brother's successor. He had always worked on this, the family farm, his sister-in-law, being a woman, could not conduct the business of the farm, nor for that matter the inn. If Polly had been a boy it would have been different.

'I lost my boys,' the poor woman said in a voice of desperation. 'One older than Poll, one younger. But he'd have wanted it regardless. If only—'

'If only Polly—' Alec prompted.

Mistress Sugden said sharply, 'Polly? What hath my Poll said to 'ee? Happen she'll give way to sense, happen she willna. But tell it to strangers—I'

'I'm no stranger in thy house now, mistress,' Alec said stoutly. 'Mistress Polly was much distressed. I came upon her in the dairy. It was an impulse—'

'You make impulses easy, lad,' Mistress Sugden said with a wan smile. 'I would my brother had stayed with us. But my father's land was taken, he had no means to start afresh.'

'Taken?'

'Enclosed. They drive us out on a pretext. There's a-many can no longer support themselves. So like my brother, Will, they venture to these settlements across the ocean.'

Her words struck Alec with the force of a blow, of a blinding light, of a revelation. He could not speak for a few seconds, then he said in a croaking voice that made Mistress Sugden stare at him, ‘Where be he now then, mistress?’

‘I know not, exactly,’ she answered. ‘There was a message brought to me from Bristol, by the hand of a seaman, one that had gone forth with Will to a settlement of the Plymouth Company, as they called it, but I know not what that may be.’

‘A written message? From thy brother?’

‘Will canna write, nor I. Nor read, neither. It had been told by Will to one that could write. So the seaman told me. It was given him by the scribe, that lay dying on the ship that bore them home.’

‘But this faithful sailor found you out to deliver it? That is a miracle,’ said Alec, gravely.

Mistress Sugden crossed herself, rather to his surprise until he remembered that the old faith persisted in these northern parts of England, though the church at Witton and the parson there were reformed.

‘How comes it he found thee? Hath the message a direction to this place?’

‘That it hath. I took it to Doctor Ogden, our parson, who reads his learned books in print. But he could scarce make out the superscription. And as for the contents of the message he made no sense of it but that it was spoke by William Trent, my brother, who was alive and well when the scribe took ship from the settlement.’

‘Hae ye still the message?’ asked Alec, very Scottish in his excitement.

‘Why so?’

‘I can read,’ Alec told her. ‘I was at the university at St Andrews.’

‘Lord sakes!’ Mistress Sugden exclaimed. ‘Be you some young good-for-nothing of degree, or some traitor cast out—’

‘Calm thyself, madam,’ Alec broke in, laughing. ‘I am nobbut a fishmerchant’s son who looked to find a fortune in London, but ill came of it and I seek a different road.’

‘I’ll fetch thee the message,’ Mistress Sugden said, rising to go into the house.

It was not surprising that the parson, whose eyesight Alec

knew was failing, should have found a difficulty over the poor scrawl, dog-eared, faded, creased from travel and much opening and folding. But Alec made out the gist of it in the end.

‘’Tis writ by a poor soul that was entrusted with a message to thee but feared he would not live to reach England. So he sent these words, Mistress, to thee and others to his own folk by the hand of one bound for Hexham. It is all set down here.’

‘It must be so,’ Mistress Sugden told him. ‘For the seaman spake in those very words. He was determined never to put foot on board ship again, so he told me. With many other complaints that made me think him a poor silly fellow. But what of my brother? What of Will?’

‘It is a very confused account as the poor soul put it down. Mayhap his bodily ills had affected his memory. It seems your brother left that settlement of the Plymouth Company in a small boat with four others to make south to a better clime and to a settlement made many years since by the great Sir Walter Raleigh. They did not return. He gave his message to the scribe or ever he left. He would have his sister know that he lives, that he hopes to prosper, where he be gone. And that is all.’

‘Little enough,’ Mistress Sugden said. ‘The sailor told me as much. It seems the scribe, like our Will, had gone out with one Captain Popham of the Plymouth Company of adventurers, as they call themselves. From Bristol, it seems. But the settlement they made was not prospering, so he had made his way by ship, fishing, to the New Found Land and thence would have returned, but died or ever he reached our shores.’

Mistress Sugden put away her precious letter and appeared to think no more of it, for she spoke no more of her brother. But in her mind a plan was forming, so strange, so daring, that it astonished her even more than it did Polly, when at last she explained it to her.

‘Go overseas!’ the girl exclaimed. ‘To Uncle William in a settlement we know nothing of? Happen we fail to find him, what then? And alone? Moother mine, thee must be daft to plan so!’

But her opinion, so daunting in its common sense to her mother’s extravagant ideas, was altered one day in late June when she was picking wild strawberries at the edge of a little wood near the hayfield. In the field Alec and the other men were

taking in the hay crop, an operation that had been delayed by constant rain over the last two weeks. They had a flat board on wheels, upon which the big rounded stooks were lifted, to be pulled away by the new stout farm pony to the stack Master Sugden was building.

From time to time Polly straightened her back to look at Alec, to admire his easy movements, lifting the whole stack while the others pushed the flat board under it. Leave Witton, leave Alec, for an unknown place in an unknown country across dangerous seas, with mad dangerous men to guide the frail ship! Never, she vowed, never in the world!

But just at that moment the dangers her imagination presented took shape in fact, the adventures were upon her in the known, the abhorred Ben Flinders, who, creeping through the wood, had seen her stooping over the strawberries, vulnerable and unaware.

He had his arms round her and was dragging her into the wood, one hand over her mouth and nose before she recovered from the first shock of surprise. But she was not without spirit. She shook her head free, screamed once, bit the hand that came at her mouth again, kicked out at the legs that stumbled among the trees.

'Vixen!' the man panted, wringing his bitten hand before seizing her again with it while he raised the other fist to strike her. I'll quiet thee! Thou'll wed me sure enough when I'll have done wi' 'ee!'

In his fury and lust he had not heard the pounding steps behind him, nor the distant shouts. The first thing he knew was Alec's hand on his collar wrenching him away from Polly so powerfully that the strong hessian tore across and split the length of his smock. The next instant Alec's blow to his chin stretched him unconscious on the ground. Paying no further heed to him the young man, without looking at Polly, who was rearranging her disordered dress, picked up her fallen basket and began to gather the little strawberries back into it.

The girl, with a pale face and trembling lips, but no tears, took the basket from him.

'I'll take thee to thy mother,' he said, gently. But she drew herself up. His act of gallantry, so clearly impersonal, had chilled her heart in spite of her gratitude for the rescue.

‘No need,’ she managed to say. ‘He’ll not trouble me now.’ She looked with hatred and contempt at the fallen man. ‘Thou’st not killed him? I would not have him dead and thee in danger for it.’

‘He is not dead,’ Alec assured her, but he stood over the prostrate brute until he saw her reach the farmhouse and turn towards the door.

The village was divided over this incident Those who favoured Ben Flinders and had considered him promised to Polly Sugden resented his overthrow by a great lout of a foreigner, a Scot moreover, still generically an enemy. Those who disliked the devious Ben or had suffered from his sly, dishonest ways and bullying attitude to girls, were pleased he had found more than his match.

All the same Polly’s independence was regretted and her mother blamed for it. And Alec found a growing coldness at the inn, on the farm, even in the church. All those thoughts and wishes and hopes, stifled for a time by the comforts of the Cow and Calf, roused up again by William Trent’s message, began to take possession of him. He knew that his time at Witton was coming to an end.

When he began to break this news gently to Mistress Sugden she suddenly realised that here lay the answer to all her perplexities.

‘I too would go from hence,’ she said, quite as if she had made up her mind weeks ago and was only now telling him of it. ‘Witton hath become hateful to me and to my girl. I would join my brother in that new settlement where he saith he hopes to prosper. If we might journey to Bristol under thy protection, Master Bridie—’

‘Indeed ye may, mistress,’ Alec told her, seeing a good many of his problems begin to dissipate and fade away. ‘And in all matters concerning the finding of a ship—my true calling, remember.’

‘Just so,’ said Mistress Sugden with dignity. ‘My brother here may do as he please in t’ farm, so he pay me my share o’t.’

That evening, when the Sugdens were gathered in the farm parlour for supper, Mistress Sugden announced her intention, joining it with Alec’s suggestion that a fortnight should be sufficient to realise her personal property and make ready to go.

It took a little longer than that, but all went smoothly and in the last week of July the village turned out to see them leave, riding on three stout horses with a pack mule for their gear. There were many who grieved to lose them, even the stranger, who would be much missed by Master Sugden for his strength and knowledge. There were many among the younger men who envied them their courage and high hopes, and a few among the boys who determined there and then to follow if they could contrive to escape from the tedium of their homes and the work in the fields. But on the whole the village welcomed the new peace following their departure and before the year was out had almost forgotten them.

Chapter Seven

The travellers reached Bristol in mid-August after a tedious but uneventful journey.

The Sugdens found the city and its surroundings astonishing. After the peace, the familiar landscape, the well-known neighbours at Witton, this great collection of houses, so close-set, so overshadowing, above all so strange, at first terrified them. Especially as the people, though used to travellers and many kinds of conveyors of goods for shipment, found this small country cavalcade remarkable. A big strong young man with a shock of red curls to his shoulders and a short-clipped curly red beard, invited a second if not a third glance. The two country women with him commanded less attention but were so significantly superior in health and looks to the underfed, pale workers living in hovels just outside the city as to draw them out to the road with envious eyes and hands outstretched for alms.

Alec remembered the wynds near the castle at Edinburgh and when Mistress Sugden, after a glance of pity and another of fear, put her hand to her waist to find her purse, he said quickly, 'Nay, mistress, for God's sake show them no coin or we are like to be robbed of all we have, even our lives an they call out to their menfolk.'

Polly was shocked rather than frightened.

We were told that Bristol was a great rich town where fortunes were made and ships came with spoils taken from our enemies at sea.'

'So they may be. The merchants will be rich; they be so in London, that other great port. But where the lion is there come the jackals, some less fortunate than others. But ride we on faster for we must come nearer to the harbour and find lodgings where ye may rest and I may put up the beasts until we know our further plans!'

'I mean to sell them when we have secured passage,' Mistress Sugden told him.

'But not before,' Alec warned her, for he already guessed that

it would not be easy to find a ship that would take them, if indeed any such lay already in the harbour.

They had left the hovels behind and guided by Alec were making for a spot he had noted where tall masts rose over the red-tiled roofs of houses. Presently they came out upon a long wharf beside a river or canal of still, or perhaps very slow-moving, water. There were barges tied up with stout rope to bollards on the quay; there were a few masted ships of small size and low draught. There was a multitude of row-boats of all kinds, from old-fashioned coracles to strange smooth-sided canoes propelled by paddles at each end of a long spar.

Alec was excited by these darting craft, mostly conducted by young boys at great speed. He drew rein to ask a man beside the water what they were called and who made them.

'Birch-bark canoe,' the man answered. 'Made by the heathen in the new lands over the sea. Captain George Popham brought them over together with the native savage he took as well. Some outlandish name he had and brown, reddish-brown skin, clad in furs and beaded leather.'

'Where be he now?' Alec asked. 'I'd fain get a sight of him.'

'In London, they say,' the man answered, turning to spit into the water. As he continued to stand with his back turned Alec rode on, but stopped after another half mile to ask if Captain Popham's ship was still in Bristol and if so where she lay.

This man could not speak for certain about Captain Popham nor his vessel, *Gift of God*. But there were others of the Plymouth Company, he said, and not put in to Bristol as did all the stouter fishing vessels that went for cod to the Great Banks of New Found Land, using the same northern route that the adventurers of former times sailed. He walked by Alec's horse, continuing to talk volubly until he could see him in the right way to come near the main harbour.

'But I warn ye to keep a good distance from that anchorage,' he said as he turned to go.

'Why so?' Alec asked.

But the man only shook his head and walked away.

'I think we should give heed to his words,' Mistress Sugden said thoughtfully. 'That seaman who brought Will's message stayed with us overnight and had wild stories of the bad men in ports everywhere he'd ventured.'

‘I think ye said he was out of affection for the sea,’ Alec answered with a laugh. But he had seen much in the Port of London during the years he had worked there. Bristol, as great a thoroughfare as the capital, must have a like dangerous crowd of bullies, robbers, murderers, despoilers of women.

So though they moved on until they saw from raised ground a distant view of sea and sails that stirred Alec’s blood and made him shout aloud for joy, he turned away and in due course discovered a clean small house, quite near an inn that recommended it, where a widow of about Mistress Sugden’s age with an apprentice son and a daughter younger than Polly, was pleased to take them in. She provided a small room for the Sugdens and put Alec with the apprentice son. When the son came home from his work he helped to unload the mule, attend to the three horses and take all four to the stables belonging to the inn, where they watered and fed them and hung up their leather before going back to the widow’s house.

For the next two days Alec went out alone to discover all he could about the activities of the Plymouth Company. He carried his dirk at his belt below the skirt of his coat, for he had taken the stranger’s warning seriously for all he made light of it to the women in order not to frighten them.

If he had been alone he would have had no difficulty in finding himself a berth on any one of several deep-water fishing craft in port. He spoke to their crews, to confirm that they crossed by the northern route, sometimes forced south by great icebergs—or ice islands as they called them, sometimes in danger from huge fish that spurted water from their heads.

‘Whales,’ Alec agreed. ‘They be washed up at times on our coasts in Scotland. But tell me of the settlements.’

The fishing vessels could tell him very little. They went across to fish; they dried or salted their catch at stages on the very edge of the ocean; then bore it home again. They described the freezing cold of these shores, the storms, the dangerous shoals where there were not rocks close inshore. They spoke of wide seas running west into a great river or perhaps leading far west to come at last to the East Indies as those fabled adventurers had attempted to find and had failed. The legend was strong in this town, Alec thought, whereas in London, apart from Sir Walter Raleigh, those explorers had been scarcely mentioned.

The fishermen had no wish to settle.

'Mark 'ee, this new land is claimed for England,' they told him. 'In the Queen's time, when ships went there to discover that way to the Indies. But nought came of it and many were lost in the attempt.'

There was however, Alec discovered, a settlement of a sort promoted by Captain Popham at a place much farther south with the outlandish name of Sagadahoc. He had built a fort there called by the name of St George. It seemed to Alec that this might be the community William Trent had left to travel south again to a more temperate clime. But of that southern settlement he could get no clear news except that it might have been prompted by the London Company. He had a vague recollection of the name spoken once or twice by Master Angus Leslie, for whom he had worked in and about the wharves of the Pool of London.

He reported all his findings and his memories to Mistress Sugden when he returned to the lodgings in the evening, begging the women not to become despondent, though he began to feel his responsibility towards them as a heavy chain about his neck.

Unencumbered he would now, he thought, be already engaged upon a fishing trip to those fabulous waters that teemed with splendid fish. The season was in full spate, the vessels constantly arriving, re-fitting and setting out again. But with no other purpose than to return. And certainly no place in their holds for two women in search of a lost brother and uncle, who might well be dead by now, though he seemed to have survived a perilous journey to Sagadahoc, and set out in even more hazardous fashion to that other place which rumour had it was called in Raleigh's time Roanoke, but thought by the people here to have been abandoned long since.

But there was neither time for, nor purpose in, brooding over what might have been had he not stayed so long in the Yorkshire Riding. Mistress Sugden was becoming anxious; they must clearly move on. The question was now where to find a ship of the London Company? Not in London, Alec swore to himself. He was still subject to the law for that killing of his twelve months ago. He had to dissuade Mistress Sugden from setting out for the capital.

‘If ye squander your whole substance, mistress, in a fruitless journey thither, for it is many miles and there be great perils on the way, how will ye fare if ever we get ship and do arrive where Master Trent is to be found? With God’s help and protection,’ he added, piously.

‘Which we do surely need,’ said Polly, who was heartily sick of their restricted life in Bristol, though it had only just come into the third day.

For Mistress Sugden had ventured very little abroad from the widow’s house and never without the latter’s guidance. Both the countrywomen attracted attention when they did so, which frightened the older one and her guide, but rather pleased Polly‘s vanity.

In this uncertainty they continued for another three days, but at the end of that time Alec had discovered a piece of news that sent him hurrying back to his companions with plans for immediate action.

‘I have tidings to set us again on our true way!’ he cried. ‘At Plymouth in Devon there is a ship newly come in from James Town, as they call it, in Virginia. Rumour hath it Captain Christopher Newport, her master, is he that hath made the first landing in that place since Sir Walter Raleigh and hath established a fort and left settlers. Little is known for sure, but we must act upon it nevertheless.’

‘The Lord be praised!’ Mistress Sugden replied, her eyes filling with tears. ‘This is His doing. Where be this Plymouth and when do we go hence to find it? We are in thy hands, Jock, for finding the ways.’

He was as ignorant as they of the exact position of the southern port though he knew it lay on the English Channel and that there were hills and wild moors and some rivers separating them from that place. So he told Mistress Sugden to settle their reckoning with the widow and with the inn for the stabling of their horses, to pack and be ready to start out at noon so that they would be well clear of Bristol by nightfall and sheltered at some place on their road to the south.

He had gathered his important news at an alehouse near the main part of the harbour where, unknown to him, a vessel of the King’s Navy had put in the night before and now lay at anchor. It was from certain members of her crew who had come ashore

that the folk at the alehouse learned of Captain Newport's arrival in Plymouth Sound, for they had themselves called there and their present mission accomplished, would return.

The object of the mission, not specifically mentioned, was obvious to most of the alehouse customers. When the navy men left the place, the word went round. The press-gang was out. Those drunken fellows had given a warning they never intended and for which they would be cruelly flogged if their indiscretion were ever known.

Many young men in peril quietly left the inns and alehouses as the word went round. Many villainous ruffians prepared to help the press-gang when it came. It was Alec's misfortune to meet a gang of such when he began his inquiries, after delivering his news to the Sugdens. He had gone to the women too soon from the alehouse to hear the warning, if indeed it had not been kept from him deliberately. So now, asking carefully but not directly as to the best route to take for the Channel ports he did not mention Plymouth and his vague questions met vaguer answers as the rogues nodded, exchanging quick looks.

But not abrupt ones. The strangers' physique, his queer speech, his ignorance, proclaimed him a foreigner whom it would be no danger to themselves to betray. A little group of accomplices in evil began to follow him quietly, swelling their numbers until about six of them crowded at mid-morning into a small inn, where Alec hoped to confirm the directions he had been given before returning to his lodgings for a meal before the noon departure.

Though he did not recognise all six of his pursuers he did notice three faces he had seen before that morning. He recollected where he had come across two of them, which was at the alehouse where he first had the news of Captain Newport's ship. He took his tankard over to this group.

'I hae seen ye afore,' he said, slipping into his Scots speech at the evident sign of their discomfiture. A plot brewing, he considered, backing swiftly as the group moved to surround him. He backed on towards the door, but slowly, his eyes beginning to shine at thought of a fight.

Put off by those blazing blue eyes and the sight of a great hand darting below the fold of a coat, which was instantly flung round the other wrist in shape of a shield, the villains paused.

They did not want a brawl that would bring others to the scene, provoke the guardians of the law, spoil all their chances of selling this valuable property to the press-gang. They had thought to take the great oaf, drunk, when they had weakened him enough to overcome him. His far too lively reaction put them off their stride. They hesitated, fatally.

Alec found the innkeeper beside him, eager to stop matters before they imperilled his house. For some minutes he had considered getting rid of the scum who should never have been allowed in.

'Be you coming or going, master?' he asked in a quavering voice. 'Can I serve you? You know these—'

He had no name for them but included them in a wave of the hand.

Another voice said clearly behind Alec, 'He goes, unless the press-gang comes before to take him. And any other of you likely lads,' he added. He was a small man with cold eyes and a precise manner. Perhaps a lawyer, anxious to use whatever power his position gave him.

'His words explained all to Alec. He turned, swinging the small man towards the innkeeper across the path of the two who had darted forward when they heard the unwelcome warning speech. Alec turned through the open doorway and ran.

It was a nightmare repetition of his first escape in London, but this time the law was not involved, only a gang of desperate criminals, seeking to buy themselves from justice by delivering innocent victims, many not even seamen, to the rigours of service in the King's ships; Alec thrust his dirk back into its sheath, pushed down his coat and dropped the run to a walk. He planned as he went. He would be a marked man from that hour and very recognisable, as always. So the sooner he joined the women and they all left Bristol City the more chance they had of throwing off pursuit. He did not know if any of the men who had followed him knew where he lodged, for he had not at once realised that he was being followed. Should he delay his return by leading them astray? Or go back at once assuming they would seek him out at the house where the Sugdens waited for his return?

He had quickened his pace again to a rapid walk as soon as he turned the first corner and found there was neither a pursuing

figure nor cries to stop him. He turned more corners, found he was lost and wasted nearly an hour finding his way out of the maze of small dwellings clustered behind the big warehouses on the wharves.

It was a near fatal delay, for instead of reaching the lodgings at noon he did not arrive there until half-past one, to find the widow in a state of agitation bordering on hysteria.

When she saw Alec she threw up her hands and cried, 'The creature swore you were sore hurt or dead! She swore and persuaded them, though I begged them to wait surer tidings.'

'Mistress Sugden! Polly! D'ye tell me they're awa wi'out me?'

'Nay, they left all here to hurry to thy aid. She swore to lead them to where you lay.'

'She! She! Who was it? Whence came she?'

'They know her at the inn. Mother Cumming they call her. The lads say, "Old Cunning". Aye, cunning she be and wicked and an evil seducer of young women. I begged them not to go out but they feared for you and she persuaded them.'

'Where will she have led them?' Alec demanded, white with anger and distress, so that the widow trembled for her own safety at his hands.

'She serves the madam of a whore house; she hath been in the trade, they say, from a young girl. Now she persuades ignorant simpletons into it. Her looks alone should have made Mistress Sugden give heed—'

'Why dids't not thou, mistress?' asked Alec furiously.

'I was not here by then, only my little maid, who knew no better.'

'Where is this place?' Alec roared in his fury at so much female stupidity. 'Where must I go to find them?'

The widow, almost speechless with fear, whispered some directions he tried to understand. Seeing him become confused she finally took him to her door and pointed along the street, repeating the turnings he must take.

'Ask for Springer's,' she said. 'Mistress Springer. They know her house, do the men of the neighbourhood. They'll tell thee and not be surprised at thy asking,' she added spitefully, for her conscience was very sore at her failure to warn the poor countryfolk of their true danger. All to maintain her own attitude of respectable, god-fearing ignorance, which was false,

she acknowledged. God forgive me, she prayed, but was stopped from absolving herself by Alec's rough voice saying, 'Mind ye dinna heed any other lying message may come to ye and mind our goods till we come again.'

He was gone before she could agree or resent these instructions, but she was sincerely sorry for her failure, so she bolted and barred the door and went upstairs to a front window from which she could command the street in both directions and be ready to welcome them back if they should reappear. She half hoped they would for her soul's sake and half hoped either the press-gang or the brothel or both might upset their plans and leave her with valuable goods to dispose of. She did not want evil to come to them but she was poor, her children were not yet of an age to help her.

Meanwhile Alec strode at a great pace to the house of ill-fame, which he had no difficulty in finding. The door was opened to him by a grey-faced crone in a tight bonnet who on sight of him began to push the door shut again with two wrinkled filthy hands. Alec put his boot in the opening and one hand against the wood so that the old woman tottered away, spitting like an angry cat.

'Lead me to Mistress Sugden and her daughter,' he ordered.

'I did never hear of any such!' she cried.

'Ye are named cumming and ye persuaded them to follow to where I lay. Take me to them.'

'In thy turn,' she said slowly. 'In thy turn. Business is brisk the day, for the sailor men have just come into port and their impatience is such—'

'Mistress Sugden!' Alec bellowed. 'Polly! Where be ye? ' Tis I, come to fetch ye from this bawdy house! Have no fear! Show yourselves!'

His voice brought instant results. There were men's shouted curses, women's screams, a hammering on doors, a pattering of feet on stairs. Into the small square hall where Alec stood came an ample, tall woman dressed in flaming red and orange. She had a mass of showy beads and gilt chains about her neck and arms and she carried a whip in her hand with which she lashed out at Alec as she swept towards him.

But she did not strike high enough. He caught the thong and pulled at it so that as she still gripped the handle he dragged her

to him and caught her in the circle of one arm and said, ‘So, vixen, I have thee close! Where be the good-wife and her girl yon witch misled into this place? No meat for thy customers, I’ll warrant.’

He laughed into her face, poked at her broad bottom with the whip he held in his free hand, then shook her to force an answer.

Madame Springer gave in. The young ruffian with his queer foreign tongue, his easy strength and blue eyes was a man after her ownheart.

‘Meat!’ she exclaimed hoarsely. ‘They have done naught but blubber since Cumming brought them to me. Set them to work I could not—’

‘Thank God for that!’ Alec breathed. ‘Let them to me and away.’

‘Stay a little.’ With breath-taking insolence she pressed up against him, lifting her wide mouth to say, ‘I have six of the prettiest wenches thou’s seen in all Bristol town and two at this moment—’

He released her with another laugh. It was never wise to anger these women. They could be controlled by kindness, they respected strength.

‘Another time,’ he promised, patting her arm. ‘And here’s an advance on thy fee.’

The money softened her still more. She turned to go but at that moment he saw Mother Cumming steal towards the door to escape into the street. He jumped back to forestall her.

‘And keep this sewer rat within till nightfall,’ he begged. ‘Otherwise—’

Madame Springer shouted, ‘Bertha!’ A figure appeared behind her. ‘Take Cumming and feed her. Keep her close till I tell thee otherwise. And thou, dame,’ she said to the shrinking hag, ‘see what unthinking greed hath brought thee. I have a mind to report this napping to the magistrates. Thou hast done a mischief to my house, no benefit. By witchcraft as like as not. I see no other means those two could have been persuaded hither. For that the penalty—’

With a shriek the old woman rushed away, closely followed by Bertha.

‘Come thee, lad, and take away thy snivelling women,’ the

bawd said, smiling grimly. ‘Though what claim they have on thy protection passes my understanding.’

Alec did not answer her. It was not her business. Besides, he was not very sure of any answer he might give beyond a common purpose and a common ignorance of how that purpose might best be fulfilled or indeed fulfilled at all with any hope of success.

When Mistress Sugden and Polly appeared however, humbled, frightened and tearful he had no heart to scold them. He gave an arm to each and led them away, sadder and wiser women for the experience, shudderingly thankful to him for the fate they had missed. Polly was wholly indignant that any could suppose her willing to submit to it, she who had defended herself against many of the lads at Witton. Her mother could not help feeling a morsel flattered, for the madam had suggested that she was nowhere near the age of retirement from these activities and she was surprised Mistress Sugden had not re-wed. This however had not lessened her tears nor her refusals.

At the lodging the widow had the door open to receive them at once with their parting meal, two hours delayed, on the table. They had no difficulty in setting out in mid-afternoon and were well on their way, skirting Bath, to reach Wells before midnight

Chapter Eight

Plymouth, in the late August of that year, still rang with excited gossip, rumour and praise for the tremendous exploit of Captain Christopher Newport and his men. That he and most of his crew had come back at all was amazing. They had been away since December of the year before, when they had sailed in a company of three ships from London, only to be held up in the Downs for several weeks by foul weather. They had had a long voyage, but at last had found their anchorage in that Chesapeake Bay where Raleigh had made his abortive settlement. Now Newport had left over a hundred new settlers there and had come home laden with riches and with promise of gold and copper if not a path struck to that further ocean they all sought.

So ran the tale that met the travellers' ears when Alec and the Sugdens rode into the town. It lifted their spirits, tired and depressed from such prolonged travel, but with native northern caution all three were inclined to reject the wilder tales. At any rate they needed at least a full day's rest before making any close inquiries, so they found themselves an inn suitable to their means and took rooms for a week.

A good night's sleep restored Alec fully, but the women were listless the next day and disinclined to move, so he went out alone, promising to take them round the town later when they were ready to see the sights, particularly the anchorage where Captain Newport's vessel lay.

'And make inquiries, Jock, if thou see'st an occasion to ask if any knows of Will. If he be at this new settlement they call James Town? For if none hath heard of him how shall we be certain he be there to welcome our coming?'

'How indeed, mistress?' Alec answered. It did appear to him, not for the first time, that the Sugdens' venture was so hazardous as to seem entirely mad. But he could not say so at this stage, having helped them thus far and being fully determined himself to return with Captain Newport if he was accepted either as would-be settler, or able seaman, shipwright

or craftsman in any other trade that was needed.

When, after cautious inquiries, he learned that a sort of office had been opened on the Hoe to give interviews to any who wished to venture on the return trip to James Town, he presented himself with his only credential, Captain Smithson's of *Sunflower,* in his hand.

The man who sat behind a table in the little room handed this to a clerk who sat beside him. The clerk read it aloud, after which the man said, 'Jock Bridie, seaman. That be you?'

'Aye, so,' said Alec, who judged rightly the fellow had little authority and was merely there to accept or refuse names that he could not even write down.

They exchanged straight glances; Alec's did not fall. The clerk leaned over and whispered. Alec did not hear distinctly, but he caught the words 'size' and 'likely fellow'. He, at least, was favourably impressed.

The other said, laconically, 'We have a full crew.'

Then I would go for a settler,' Alec answered. He explained his abilities as carpenter, shipwright and so forth. The clerk nodded even more emphatically.

'You will be written down to see Captain Newport personally,' the other told him. 'Come tomorrow early, by six o' the morning. You will be taken off to see the captain.'

Though Alec asked one or two more questions he got no answer, which did not really surprise him for there was a long line of men waiting to be interviewed.

When he reported this scene to Mistress Sugden she became thoughtful.

'Thou did'st not present my case?' she asked.

'Nay, mistress. There was no occasion to do so, nor was the man who sat there one who would decide such a matter.'

'How then shall I go about this business?'

'Tomorrow, I understand, I am to see Captain Newport. When I explain my position I will speak of ye both to him and ask for William Trent. He will surely know if he be one of their fellowship.'

This he did, finding it easy enough to speak freely to Captain Newport in his cabin on the poop of the *Gift of God*.

They had been taken off to the tall barque, a party of thirty men in two of the ship's boats. A very mixed party, Alec

thought, with some misgiving, for already the volunteers had been sifted over, as he had been, to sort out any likely settlers from the great crowd of romantics, ne'er-do-wells, felons, weaklings and other unsuitable material that had presented itself. Nevertheless, the possibles still included far too many undesirables, Alec thought. His increasing dejection continued until he reached the barque's side when he climbed rapidly aboard well ahead of the others in the same boat.

He was taken at once to Captain Newport, who gravely read his testimonial and handed it back to him.

'I have a full complement,' he said, but added at once, 'Not that an extra seaman is not welcome on a voyage when accidents do sometimes occur.'

He smiled suddenly and Alec felt moved to smile back.

'Tell me thy other skills,' the captain demanded.

Alec ran through the list, not forgetting this time to mention his knowledge of those injuries that might be encountered at sea and their treatment.

'I got this skill in my father's fishing fleet in Fife,' he said, seeing a look of unbelief in Captain Newport's face.

'I do not doubt thee,' the other told him and sighed, remembering his own lost left arm and the agony that went unrelieved for many days and nearly cost him his life.

'You are accepted,' he said, formally, 'Come aboard again in three weeks' time when I shall have returned from London. I aim to sail in October if my company agree and will have me provisioned by then.

'I would know, sir—' Alec began but Newport waved him away.

'Later, my lad, later,' he said sharply.

Alec left. He had been accepted as a settler, an 'adventurer' as they were called in the town, who might make himself useful on the voyage if an occasion appeared. He had not said a word about Mistress Sugden and her daughter nor been allowed to ask a single question about William Trent.

But he had been accepted, which fact he reported with great glee to the women on his return.

'But what of us?' Polly clamoured, while her mother stared thoughtfully at the young man, wondering if he might, even at this late hour, have betrayed them.

Alec's hesitation, when Polly repeated her question, his reddening face and fidgeting hands made her heart sink still further. But still Mistress Sugden dared not, could not, bring herself to accuse him of ill faith. Instead she said sensibly, without anger, 'Come on, lad! Out wi' it. Captain willna take us? Is that it?'

Alec was overcome with sudden guilt. 'I faith, mistress,' he burst out, 'I did never speak of ye at all!' Then, as they both rose up, aghast, he went on, 'Nay, hear me out! It was not of deliberate intent. But Captain Newport had much to say, many questions to ask. I was afeared he would refuse me, for he hath his crew made up and I am to go as passenger, would-be settler, but stand-by for any seaman that falls sick by disease or accident. I tried to speak of Master Trent, but could not. So in the end I felt such relief, such gratitude, I was away down the deck or ever I could discharge the rest of my mission. And that's the truth o't,' he finished ruefully, looking down on the ground like a boy expecting to be whipped, Mistress Sugden thought.

'So what now?' she asked, determined not to forgive him before he had promised to try again.

'So we wait three weeks, when Captain Newport returns from London. I am to go aboard again, by his special command, that he may have me shown the vessel, told what goods I may bring with me and suchlike detail.'

'So then thou wilt include us in those goods, I reckon,' Polly said with a toss of her head.

'I will make inquiries for your uncle,' he told her. 'If he be known at James Town, as I heartily trust he may, I will ask for you to be included in the tally of the settlers.'

'And if he be not known, is that sufficient proof he be not in the settlement?'

'How can I say? The sufficiency is a matter of thy opinion. Mistress. And thy mother's. But we must hope they do indeed confirm his presence there.'

To himself he could give no assurance of any kind. Indeed he became with every day that passed less willing to see the two women submit themselves to hardships that sounded worse and more varied with every conversation he held with his future shipmates. Moreover no member of the crew of the *Gift of God* had heard of William Trent.

However, punctually to the day Captain Newport returned to Plymouth and very soon after that word came to Alec to go out to the barque for a fresh interview.

'Art still of a mind to sail with us?' Newport asked him as he entered the captain's cabin.

'Aye, sir, that I am,' Alec answered.

'You have questioned my crew, I hear. My bo'sun tells me you have some knowledge of a great ship's gear, not merely of North Sea fishing boats.'

'On *Sunflower*, Captain Smithson, sir—'

'Oh ay, that testimonial, Jock Bridie.' The captain paused with a twinkle in his eye that puzzled Alec at the time, but which he was to understand later.

There was silence between them for a minute or two. Then Alec ventured to say, 'Sir, may I ask a question about this, settlement at James Town?'

'What is it?'

'Have ye any knowledge of one William Trent, a sometime farmer of Witton in the Yorkshire dales, who sailed with the Plymouth Company, Captain Popham, from Bristol, but left their settlement to go south?'

Captain Newport, who had listened to this with growing astonishment, said sharply, 'Who hath spoken to thee of this Trent? A poor crazed fugitive that came out of the forest half naked and was lucky to be missed by the bullet fired at him as he ran to our palisade. Which of my men hath chattered of his history? I will not have my fresh adventurers disturbed.' He brought his fist down on the table, rattling his quills and his ink horn.

'None of your men, sir,' Alec hastened to explain, 'but his sister and niece who are here in Plymouth hoping to join him.'

To Alec's surprise the expected fresh burst of anger and total refusal did not come. The captain stared, opened his mouth, swore softly and then said, 'How come they know of him at all?'

Alec explained about Trent's being obliged to leave his farm, his intention to go with the adventurers, the message he had sent back by the poor scribe who had written it for him and then entrusted it to the retiring seaman to deliver on his way to his Northumberland home.

At the end of the story Captain Newport nodded.

‘And how came it you are their emissary now?’ he asked, with a tight smile. ‘The daughter, eh? Eh, lad?’

‘Nay, sir,’ Alec answered, refusing to be provoked as in his younger days he might have been. ‘But Mistress Sugden was good and kind when I needed work to earn my bread, so as her intention matched with mine I undertook to bring her here with her daughter. There is no other tie but our common wish to leave these shores.’

He waited. Captain Newport rapped on the table, shuffled his papers, picked up one or two small objects and put them down again. At last he sighed, cleared his throat and said, ‘I would liefer have none of the sex aboard my ship, for the poor heifers are like to have a sad time of it on the voyage not to speak of the temptation they offer. But it happens I have undertaken to give ship-room to a lady, a Mistress Forrest and her maid, one Anne Burrows. Also the Company said and rightly, I suppose, we must get women out there if a real settlement is to be made, which is our declared purpose. Four of them will be better than two. So tell thy charges I’ll take them, but there must be no complaining.’

Alec thanked him fervently. His last problem was solved. From now on the Sugdens were their own responsibility. As he went to the cabin door with a bounding step the captain’s sharp voice made him spin round.

‘Harkee,’ said Newport, ‘I purpose to find quarters for these four women somewhere about my poop. Which is forbid to all but my officers and myself and certain gentlemen of rank who will voyage with us. Understood?’

‘Aye, sir and thankfully,’ said Alec, not to be put at a disadvantage. He heard the captain’s chuckle as he shut the door behind him.

He would have understood it better had he known all Captain Newport had done, where he had been, whom he had met in the City of London during his brief visit there to present the Company with a full report of his voyage, his discoveries and their result.

It had been a long voyage by way of the Canaries and Cape Verde Islands to the West Indies, following the usual path of adventurers and pirates to the so-called Spanish Main, that was no longer so firmly Spanish as heretofore, for the islands were

being colonised rapidly now, in Spain's increasing weakness, by English, Dutch and French as well. Captain Newport had stopped only to take in provisions and attend to the sick. He had then proceeded north with his sister ship until he found the headlands of Chesapeake Bay, where he turned in and anchored. He had with him sealed orders setting out those named for the governing body. These were, besides himself, Captain Gosnold, master of the sister ship, a certain Captain Martin who had served under Drake, a Master Kendall a Captain Ratcliffe and one John Smith, who had fought in the Turkish wars and been held in captivity in those parts.

They had set up an enclosure, landed their stores and continued their exploration. Newport had to explain to the Company that John Smith had been troublesome and for a time was excluded from the Council, even held a prisoner for his insubordinate behaviour. But before the *Gift of God* returned to London, bringing a load of clapboards and report of far more valuable materials with small samples of the same, John Smith was reinstated in the Council and had indeed shown more energy, enterprise and authority in dealing with the natives than any of the other members.

The London Company was now reorganised as the Virginia Company under a certain Sir Thomas Smith, who was no relation of the adventurer. The meetings with Captain Newport took place in Sir Thomas's house in Philpot Lane in the City.

When they had heard the captain's tale the merchants who had listened to it began to speak all at once, for they had ventured their money to equip the expedition and had many questions to ask.

Patiently, in order of seniority or the size of their stake in the business. Sir Thomas called upon them to speak.

'I would ask Captain Newport what led him to form a settlement in this spot? He speaks of recognising the headland he hath named Cape Henry after our Prince. How is this?'

'I sailed with Sir Walter Raleigh, sir, when he founded that earlier settlement called Roanoke.'

The faces around grew severe: none spoke.

'But naturally,' Newport continued, 'I did not land my party at the same ill-fated spot. I went farther in to a place where a small peninsula juts, giving us the protection of water on three sides,

leaving but one aspect of forest from which a heavy attack could come.'

'You anticipated attack from the naturals, I presume?' asked Sir Thomas, seeing a general air of discouragement had come over the listeners.

'We prepared ourselves,' Captain Newport agreed. 'At first they were friendly, but they be treacherous folk to deal with. Besides, they are formed into many tribes, Pamunkey, Paspahegh and many others. We lost men killed in sudden raids until we had our palisade built high and strong. There is ample wood for all needs.'

'Such as you have brought home,' another merchant said. 'But shis is not of great value. We still have our English forests; shrinking, I grant ye, but not yet exhausted.'

'I have seen metals gleam when we dig,' Captain Newport said cautiously, producing his small samples. In his own mind he believed he had found gold, but there had not been time or opportunity to wash or otherwise prepare the ore. However, his audience's eyes brightened, so he described the journey he had made up the river in the pinnace they had taken across in parts and put together at the settlement. He and Smith and the ship's surgeon with five others had secured some friendly guides and sailed far inland, meeting villages at intervals along the banks, exchanging beads and other trinkets for food, occasionally obliged to fire off their pistols or muskets when threatened. They killed no one but frightened all.

'If none was killed, why were they so much impressed?' asked Sir Thomas.

'Because we had already shown them the firearm could slay a deer at a greater distance than their arrows.'

'How far did you go?'

'Until we came to some great falls. The Indians in their canoes carry their craft to the head of the falls to continue. This we could not do with the pinnace. So we had to return. Besides, the guides spoke of a very fierce and dangerous tribe called Monogan. They would not have come with us farther. But they spoke too of great waters in the far west that I take it may be the ocean we seek to lead us by the western route to the East Indies.'

Again the eyes brightened and the merchants stirred in their chairs.

‘So you returned again to your new settlement?’ said Sir Thomas.

‘To James Town as we have called it, subject to your worship’s agreement,’ said Captain Newport calmly.

‘You returned in safety from this discovery?’

‘In safety and honour,’ replied the captain. ‘Having met with the overlord, one Powhatan, that rules all those tribes, and having seen their cultivation in many farther clearings by the way. And sampled their tobacco pipes, the pipes of peace as they call them.’

Here Captain Newport produced some leaves of tobacco, some merely withered, others properly dried; also a long-stemmed Indian pipe. Many of the Company had seen these objects before and some had sampled them, for Spanish tobacco, though very costly, had begun to make an appearance in the houses of the rich.

‘So,’ a merchant said, ‘they grow it in these parts as well as in the hotter climes?’

‘They do. And pumpkins and gourds of great size and corn and a multitude of herbs I have little knowledge of. Together with some poisonous plants, very noxious to the touch for they bring out a burning itch that lasteth three days or more.’

When Captain Newport had finished his report the meeting proceeded to question him about his future plans. Was he preparing to return to James Town himself? It was clear the settlement must be supported. He had left but a hundred and five men to establish themselves. More hands would be needed, more provisions until they could support themselves from their own plantings. Above all more exploration and some more profitable export than the clapboards.

‘We will have thy samples assayed,’ Sir Thomas declared. ‘Then we may decide better.’

‘This is what I propose,’ said Newport firmly. ‘I have already engaged my crew and there is no lack of volunteers in Plymouth town who would venture out with me.’

He did not at this time mention the four women, for he had not yet met Mistress Forrest, nor had Alec spoken of the Sugdens. But he did state that he was going to pick and choose who he would take. He described Alec in some detail and so well that he roused considerable excitement in the breast of

Master Angus Leslie, who had spoken hardly at all during the meeting, but had understood its significance better than many.

When the meeting broke up Master Leslie approached the adventurer to invite him to his house so that his young kinsman and household might hear more of the strange lands across the ocean.

Captain Newport accepted gladly. He understood that Master Leslie's interest lay chiefly in the fish trade. Though the bulk of the northern ocean fishing landed the catch in Bristol, he looked forward to promoting some from his own field. He explained this to the merchant saying, 'That young man I spoke of at the meeting hath knowledge of fish. A Scot from Fife.'

'That calleth himself Jock Bridie?'

'You know him sir? But this is extraordinary!'

'Just so. And a matter for rejoicing, since until a week ago we thought him dead, but now we may rejoice indeed. But do not speak of him before my household. Speak only of the many wonders you have to tell. I will later inform those who should know of Sandy's, of Jock's reappearance.'

Captain Newport was not unused to this kind of mystery and found no difficulty in holding his tongue. When he returned to Plymouth he bore with him a sealed letter addressed to Jock Bridie, to be given to him after he sailed. The captain locked it away in his cabin together with the ship's papers. He promised himself a certain amusement when he was able to fulfil his commission.

In the meantime there was much to be done, stores to buy, tools and machines for various purposes to collect. He gladly accepted Mistress Sugden's suggestion of a spinning wheel and loom, though as he had no sheep to provide wool he wondered if they could be of any use.

He had not considered his ship large enough to take livestock on this second outward voyage. The settlement was too small as yet and the question of forage too difficult.

So Alec took the horses to be sold, also the mule. Mistress Sugden felt she had now severed her last link with England, but she did not regret it. She was, after all, going to her brother. Captain Newport had given her accommodation in his ship far better than any she had hoped for; Mistress Forrest, though a lady of quality, was affable and her maid, of about Polly's age,

was lively. So Mistress Sugden was content.

As for Alec, on the day they sailed he watched the Devon coast go down below the horizon with a sense of freedom he had missed for more than one hunted, unhappy year. Whatever now befell him he was no longer an outlaw but looked to be a citizen of the far distant offshoot of that England his Scottish nature had never yet quite wholly accepted as overlord. Did not accept at all until he had thrown in his fortune with Jamie, the Scot, now king of England as well.

Behind him, standing with her mother, Polly watched Alec. She had seen little of him during the weeks since their arrival in Plymouth and now, the captain had ordered, the women passengers were to consort as little as possible with the men and not at all with the crew, even the officers among them. Well she could only obey this rule, but no power on earth could stop her gazing at the back of the being she loved best on earth, nor take away her joy should he at any time condescend to return her look.

Chapter Nine

When they had been at sea for three weeks and had passed the island of Madeira, Captain Newport sent for Alec. Seated in his cabin with the young man standing before him he handed him the sealed letter from Master Leslie, bidding him open and read.

'If it be not of too private a nature, I would know the contents,' Captain Newport said with a smile.

Alec did not look up from his reading, but answered gruffly, for he was much moved, 'I think ye may know them a' ready, sir.' Then he did look up, his face flushing with pleasure and went on, 'Master Leslie employed me in his business, sir, until I had the misfortune to—kill a man—'

'In fair fight, but by inadvertence, as Master Leslie told me. Which seemed to me a riddle past my understanding. But go on. I have no wish to pry, as I told thee.'

'He says the matter is wholly forgot and the true culprit hath paid the price. Though my presence in London would embarrass the officers of the law there and annoy the King, there can be no reason for concealing my true name and station and so—'

'Thou art not Jock Bridie. That testimonial then was counterfeit?'

'Indeed no, sir. I took the false name of Bridie, and 'twas as Bridie I worked a passage from London to the Forth and earned that commendation by my own true performance.'

Captain Newport was amused by the young man's indignation. But he did not wish to rouse the Scot's temper further, so he merely said, in a quiet voice but with authority, 'I would wish to use thy true name from now on. So give it to me, if you please.'

'Alexander Nimmo,' Alec told him. 'My parents call me Alec and my friends Sandy.'

That last is self-evident,' said Captain Newport. 'I shall use it therefore, Master Sandy Nimmo, but will enter the formal one in my log. Make what explanation thou wilt to thy present companions. I will convey any letter you care to write to Master Leslie upon my return to England again.'

He nodded his dismissal and Alec went away to the deck

feeling dazed, unreal, disturbed. His new-found happiness, that had grown with every league of increased distance from England, took on a fresh dimension. He felt he had not only regained his freedom, entering upon a new and exciting life, but had also renewed the old valued friendships he thought he had lost for ever. If there was a small cloud in the fair sky of Master Leslie's present kind hopes for his future it lay in the lack of any mention of Francis. But he put this down to caution. How had Master Leslie written it? 'We have lately been much gratified, Jock, to have tidings of thee through the good offices of Captain Olaf Henderson, who, having his ship in the Pool, was approached by a certain Captain Smithson of Leith, a conveyor of sea-coal in his brig *Sunflower* on which thou sailed north when thou left us. This captain in turn had been given a message to the effect thou wert alive and had come out of Scotland and were to take ship from a Channel port and would have thy friends to know of this. That ship it seems is under orders of the London Company and sails shortly for the New Lands. So God's blessing on thy venture, my dear lad, and may thy past adventure, so hardly paid for, be now forgotten. Send to us again thy tidings and do not fear to use thine own name henceforward.'

Alec folded the letter. Captain Newport had fulfilled his promise to Master Leslie. He had not broken the seal, he had kept the missive until they were twenty-two days out from Plymouth. However, there were others on board who might not be so trustworthy. Better to have nothing private or valuable about him in those close quarters. Reluctantly he tore up the parchment into small fragments and going up into the bows gave them to the wind that was driving them along so bravely.

To change his name was no easy matter, he found. His companions had accepted him as Jock Bridie and since he had already given assistance to the crew now and then the seamen as well addressed him by that name. In the end he confided his full story to Mistress Sugden, swearing her to secrecy, except that he begged her to call him Sandy, since this could well be a nickname taken from his colouring. He decided, rightly, that she would not gossip, as she understood the word, but would feel impelled to confide in Mistress Forrest, who would tell her maid Anne Burrows, who would tell Polly, The girls would severally

tell those lads with whom they exchanged guarded words during their daily exercise on deck and so by the end of the voyage the substitution would be complete.

Captain Newport took his ship by the same route he had used previously, only spending as little time as possible in the Islands to add to his provisions. The Spaniards were warned by now; they believed this new settlement that had been reported to them was a military venture to build forts on the north-eastern coast of the new lands, from which to attack Spanish possessions. They were prepared, though not in much strength nor at all efficiently, to prevent reinforcements and food arriving to the English.

So Captain Newport thought it wiser to stop only so long as he needed to take in fresh water, fruit and herbs to combat the illness he had on board by this time. To land his invalids would mean their certain murder though they begged to be put ashore to die of their diseases on dry land away from the filthy, foetid, crowded, tossing hell the ship had become. Newport knew that some of them would probably die in any case and would never make useful settlers, but he could not bring himself to abandon them. Moreover Alec had already exercised his liking and talent for treating the sick and maimed. With common sense and by an example of devoted nursing, he had already brought a few emaciated sufferers back to real health after their initial tortures and fears of sea-sickness. He now managed to improve a few more before Cape Henry appeared on the horizon and much complaining was forgotten in the excitement of that landfall.

Alec stood with the women watching the land grow, gain colour, gain detail; Bleak cliffs, wide shallow pale beaches. Behind these a dense forest of tall trees in some places not far from the water's edge.

Sounding as they went, Captain Newport took his ship into the wide bay and with her sails losing the wind moved up the first bend of the great river called James after the King.

'Should we not soon have sight of the town?' asked Polly. She had taken hold of Alec's hand as the ship glided on. Sailors were aloft taking in the mains; the royals were already down; other men were laying out the anchor and attaching its great chain. There was much shouting of orders and now and then cheers from the eighty recruited settlers crowded along the bulwarks.

There are none to welcome us,' Mistress Sugden declared, roundly. 'Think you they be gone elsewhere?'

'Or dead,' Alec wondered, with an inward shudder of dread.

'There! Look there!' a passenger cried and others took up the cry.

Darting out from the land came a cluster of those light canoes Alec had seen at Bristol each manned by two kneeling red-brown figures, a rough blanket flung across a naked torso, round each blue-black sleek head a band with a feather or two sticking up from it, a bow and arrows across each back, thrust through a belt.

'Naturals,' Alec explained to his now silent, awed companions. 'But friendly by the look of them.'

If Captain Newport had any doubt of this he did not show it, but continued calmly on with only a few scraps of sail driving his ship at a slow walking pace. The canoes paddled alongside, shouting unintelligible remarks in hoarse voices and getting no response, for Newport and his crew were busy and the recruits understood nothing and in any case had nothing to say.

They were now approaching a spit of land, a narrow, square peninsula, bare of trees, as of any kind of vegetation. Upon it lay a scattered collection of tents and huts, whose tops showed raggedly above a close-set palisade of wooden uprights, the bark facing outward, evidently bound together upon the inside with horizontal ties.

At sight of this an incredulous sigh, half gasp, half groan, went up from the watchers on the ship. As they continued to stare Captain Newport ordered the last of the canvas off the yards, put his vessel up into the wind and dropped his anchor.

As this manoeuvre took place all on board were turned with their backs to the huts and their faces to the opposite distant tree-clad shore to which the Indian canoes were fast retreating.

'I think,' said Alec gravely, 'that we have arrived and this is James Town.'

''Tis no *town*!' cried Polly in a shrill voice of fear and disgust. ''Tis farm buildings in a wilderness!'

'God in His mercy come to our aid!' prayed Mistress Sugden. 'God help us in this our hour of peril!'

'Amen to that!' cried Alec.

Many of those near them sank to their knees to add their

prayers to those of Mistress Sugden, while others began to murmur of their disappointment and even to threaten.

In a short time, however, while the sailors began to prepare the ship's boats for lowering into the water, a few figures, moving slowly, hesitant at first, then jubilant, began to come out through the gates of the palisade. They shouted, they waved, they were joined by a few more.

'God's life!' Captain Newport muttered, pacing up and down his poop deck. 'Where be the councillors? Master Wing-field? Captain Archer? Captain Smith? Hath there been trouble again? Mutiny?'

He called to his first mate and they consulted together. Afterwards the word went round that Master Mate would go ashore with some of the crew to inspect the landing stage, discover why the notables had not come forth to welcome them, find out if any epidemic illness accounted for their absence.

'Take Master Sandy Nimmo with you,' the captain ordered. 'He may represent our new adventurers and help you deal with any untoward happening. Also encourage these laggards who have not yet welcomed us. I will make no further move till you signal me.'

But while the mate was preparing one of the long boats and choosing sailors to man it a party of those who had left the palisade came off in a small rowing boat and having been helped up a rope ladder demanded to see Captain Newport immediately.

The interview took some time, after which the Captain himself came out, gave orders to postpone the first shore party and had himself taken ashore in the mate's longboat, followed by the messengers, for such the watching crowd on board took them to be.

All that day the new settlers watched and waited, not understanding the delay, their neglect, or the various movements between the rowing boats and a pinnace and shallop also moored in the anchorage. But the ship's mate came back and set the crew to laying out stout warps fore and aft to the trees on the bank to prevent the ship swinging, for the river was tidal at James Town, being only a short distance from the wide reaches of Chesapeake Bay.

It was mid-afternoon when orders came from Captain

Newport to send ashore an advance party of settlers, including Alec and the four women. Also to prepare to send the rest in parties of ten at hourly intervals.

In this way Alec became one of the first of the adventurers to enter the settlement, only to find there a state of affairs that threw them all into acute dismay.

Inside the palisade, that on closer inspection showed many deficiences in its construction, there was a collection of dwellings that compared unfavourably, in Alec's eyes, with the worst of the hovels he had seen in the Scottish Highlands. Some were little better than shelters, made of the branches of trees and roofed with caked mud and leaves. Others were tents, roofed with tarpaulin, a few were more substantial huts, walled with planks sawn from tree trunks, the bark left on the outside. At the centre of the collection an attempt had been made to construct two public buildings, one a church with a cross standing above the door, beside it a second, barn-like structure, of very similar size, also with a double door at one end and windows down the sides, unglazed and closed by shutters.

These surroundings were poor and primitive enough to damp the hardiest spirits, but the acute dismay felt by the newcomers was chiefly caused by the emaciated, haggard souls who crept towards them on feeble legs as they moved into the space before the church.

The mate from the ship halted his party, looking about him for some person of authority to whom he might report their arrival. While they waited in a state of uncertainty they began to notice, what they had missed in their excitement, that the air was very cold and frosty and there was snow on the higher branches of the distant fir trees, though the ground beneath their feet was muddy from much trampling. Also that many of the huts had plumes of blue smoke rising straight up towards the chill grey sky.

Since those settlers who had come out to the river bank were still active on the water and so few had emerged within, standing silent in their doorways or just outside them, Alec turned to the mate and said, 'Shall I ask where we may find those in authority? Surely they must have seen us as we sailed in across the bay?'

The mate said slowly, 'They be in poor case. Mayhap they

starve. It were safer to stay together.' Then he raised his voice and shouted, 'Ahoy! Ahoy! Captain Newport, the *Gift of God*, sir! Shore party arrived, Master President, sir!'

His cries produced such an instant response it was clear the notable had been preparing with speed and some care a ceremony of welcome, prompted by Captain Newport. The doors of the town hall as it proved to be, next to the church, were suddenly flung open. The captain emerged, followed by a group of men, gowned and capped, with fur capes about their shoulders, who looked about them, saw the small party quite near and hurried up to them with outstretched hands of welcome.

The mate they recognised, but greeted as a subordinate. Their anxious eyes swept the rest of the men with them, returning with approval to Alec's tall figure, for he stood several inches above any there.

The mate saluted. He seemed bewildered, looking at Captain Newport for guidance. The latter paid no attention to him. Instead he pronounced in loud tones that Captain Ratcliffe was now President in place of Master Wingfield. The President welcomed them. The other councillors welcomed them.

Captain Ratcliffe, who looked pale and ill, spoke with difficulty, which was not surprising seeing his power had been so suddenly diminished and his plans overthrown by Newport's arrival. But he managed to say, 'We greet you with joy and gratitude. You will have thought it strange there were so few abroad to welcome you. It is not strange to us, seeing that of the hundred and more adventurers Captain Newport left in our—in our Council's jurisdiction, there are but thirty-eight in all still living, counting ourselves.'

There was a gasp of horror from the newcomers.

'Captain Smith,' said the President, turning to a short stocky bearded man beside him. 'Will you dispose of this advance party in such of the dwellings as have been cleansed and prepared to receive them. Captain Archer and Master Martin will assist you. I, with the rest of the Council, will go out with Captain Newport to welcome your companions,' he added, turning to the mate. 'A very speedy unloading must be set in motion. You understand,' he repeated speaking more directly still to the newcomers, ''Tis most urgent. From Christmas we have begun to starve, our

provisions quite gone. The savages have brought corn for which we give them beads, but their price rises and our gift-coffers too are now almost empty.'

He spoke with a nervous energy that conveyed to the adventurers more even than their sight of the miserable dwellings what sort of existence the settlers had suffered during the time Captain Newport had been away from James Town. Their condition had clearly become desperate in the interval.

But after so short a time? How then would the newcomers fare? They had brought fresh stores with them and Captain Newport, when he had made up a new cargo to export, would return to England and bring yet more settlers and more provisions to this land of promise, as it had been described to them. Promise of what?

A new life? When for so many it had been already but an old death, from privation, disease or wounds in battle.

Seeing the glum looks and grim asides his new charges were exchanging Captain Smith went up to Alec and said, 'Be you an adventurer, a seaman, or what else?'

'Both and more besides,' Alec answered boldly. He was cold and hungry and very tired of standing in the mud doing nothing. 'If there be houses for us to occupy I ask thy favour to lead us to them. I have a particular interest, sir, in that I act on behalf of this good-wife and her daughter who have made a long and perilous voyage to find Mistress Sugden's brother, known or rather thought to be, a citizen here.'

Those about him began to murmur at this declaration. They were well aware of the special treatment accorded to the four women travellers and though they had not resented it in deference to their sex, they saw no reason why Alec, no relative even, should gain a comparative advantage. And for two of them only. Mistress Forrest protested in a shrill voice, demanding precedence for herself to be taken to her kinsman.

Captain Smith ignored the complaints and though he did not fully understand the situation yet saw that discontent was growing fast and declared roughly to Alec, 'Do not put me off with long stories, fellow. Art thou a settler or no?'

'I am,' Alec answered. 'And a sailor, too. A shipwright if need

be. Mistress Sugden owned a farm till she set out to find William Trent.'

Captain Smith stared at this, began to speak, then breaking off turned and giving a crisp command to follow him led the way to that part of the settlement beyond the public buildings and nearest to the river on the side of the peninsula away from the anchorage. When he reached some empty huts, he began to distribute them to the eight adventurers who had come ashore in Alec's company. He placed four to a hut, warning them they might have to admit more until enough of the abandoned dwellings had been properly prepared for the others and if necessary fresh ones built.

This done he turned to Alec whom he had ignored so far in the distribution. Mistress Sugden and Polly had been taken into the Town Hall to await the allocation of the billets.

'Can we not place those four women together?' he asked. He seemed uncertain about them, which puzzled Alec.

'They were not known to one another in Plymouth,' he answered. 'But now are become close friends. Mistress Forrest is a lady of some quality, as ye may have noted. Anne Burrows is her maid. I believe she hath a connection with the family of Master Wingfield.'

Captain Smith nodded absently.

'But those two thou hast befriended, I think? They seek poor Will Trent? They have a sad ending to their quest.'

'He is dead?'

'Nay. 'T'were better he had died.'

'Tell me, sir, I beg ye, that I may prepare them.'

Alec's anxiety and concern were so genuine and so deeply felt that Captain Smith was moved to put a hand on his shoulder in approval.

'He came to us out of the forest not three months after we settled,' he said slowly. 'The naturals of this part, Pamunkeys, were of doubtful temper at that time. We kept a lookout by day and by night. He came at dusk in an uncertain light, just as these Indians creep in to make a raid, looking like shadows among the trees. One of our guards fired at him, but he came on, was seen to be white and was admitted. He told us his name was Trent, Will Trent, he said. He had travelled many moons. He spoke a strange mixture of Indian dialect and English and the dialect

was none we understood, none spoken in all the tribes of the Algonquin nation under Powhatan.'

Alec waited. He did not understand the import of this explanation, but rightly guessed that Captain Smith would not welcome an interruption and was used to have his own way, however much he offended those he was with.

'He hath never given any other explanation,' Smith continued at last. 'He hath never given any detail. But when he was taken ill of an ague about All Hallows E'en and we had to tend him and change his clothes, we found he had suffered at the hands of those fiends and it was a miracle he still lived.'

Alec had heard tales both in Bristol and Plymouth of the sort of treatment the redskins, as they were called there, gave their prisoners. So now he nodded and said, 'Is he deformed? Is it that I must prepare the women to see?'

Captain Smith shook his head.

'Tell them simply he hath suffered and his mind is affected by it.'

'That will terrify them!'

'But it is true,' Captain Smith said coldly. 'In this place no one can escape the truth for long.'

So Alec did the best he could. He secured from Captain Smith a hut with two rooms to it which he could share at first with Mistress Sugden and Polly. When he returned to the Town Hall to tell them of this he found that Mistress Forrest had been lodged with Master Wingfield, the ex-president. It turned out that she was a relative of Captain Gosnold, master of Newport's sister ship on the first voyage and this was the chief reason for her coming out, not the more distant connection with Wingfield. But she had to be told to her great grief that Gosnold had died the August before. Since, through Gosnold, she was also a connection of my Lord Willoughby, President Ratcliffe, noting her degree, had decided she must be housed as befitted her station of gentlewoman. What he did not tell her was that Master Wingfield had been confined in the pinnace when he was deposed from office and might very well have been executed on some trumped-up charge had not Captain Newport arrived that morning to release him.

Captain Smith had also escaped death that day by a hairs-breadth on a lawyer's quibble put forward by Captain Gabriel

Archer, self-styled Recorder to the colony. Smith too had been released by Captain Newport. He had taken it with his customary fortitude, for he had spent a lifetime in peril and was by this time unmoved by any violent change in his fortunes.

But the news of Mistress Forrest's arrival pleased him. His own family had contacts with these relatives of hers and though Wingfield in his pride and arrogance had looked down upon Smith as a common mercenary and had refused to treat him as an equal, the latter hoped through Mistress Forrest's influence to improve his standing in the settlement.

So the four women were very thankfully housed that same evening, with such of their baggage as could be carried by Alec and a couple of seamen. This included some blankets and mattresses, very necessary in the bitter frost that came down with the night. Mistress Forrest and her maid parted from the others with tears and promises to meet the next morning. Then Alec took Mistress Sugden and Polly to the hut he had been given and they made shift to arrange their goods and prepare a meal.

A bright wood fire lit them, there were no candles, no furniture but a single bench and a rough table, no cooking pans, only a bowl of oats, some ship's biscuit and some cheese from the ship's stores, this last reduced to a kind of friable lace by a multitude of weevils. Alec managed to secure a vessel of fresh water to drink.

Mistress Sugden made no complaint. She was too shocked and too tired to give voice to her feelings. But Polly, thankful to have Alec still with them for she had feared he would be placed elsewhere when he had been ordered to go off with Captain Smith, managed to take him a little apart from her mother and whisper, 'What of Uncle Will? Is he not here? Hath he not been here? Is there some mistake?'

'No mistake,' Alec said. 'Wait till tomorrow morn.'

But Mistress Sugden heard them and started up. She could not rest, she declared, until she had seen Will. It was no use Alec explaining what he knew of the man's history and present plight. She must see him. She must take him into her care, restore him, cherish him. Alec must find him out and lead them to his dwelling.

Much against his better judgment this was done. They

discovered the whereabouts of William Trent's hut, which was some distance off. There was smoke coming from a hole in the roof which suggested he was within, though he did not open the door when they knocked.

After a time Alec found there was a latch and pressing it pushed open the creaking timbers. They saw a withered figure crouching by the glowing logs who turned his head to look at them, then turned back without a word.

But Mistress Sugden had seen his face and recognised it though it was much changed. She moved forward, crying, 'Will, dost not know me? Dost not remember Witton? Thy home and mine, Will. I am thy sister, Meg! Here is thy niece, Polly. Will, Will speak to thy Meg!'

He scrambled to his feet then, staring wildly at the three strangers who seemed to fill so completely his small home, who had broken in so suddenly upon his uneasy waking dreams. He made for the door, but Alec stood before it, barring his way. In a second a knife flashed in his hand and Mistress Sugden screamed. But Alec rod gripped the bony arm that held the knife and with his other hand took it away.

'Ye have nought to fear,' he said, bathing hard, for the other, though so thin and worn-looking, was struggling madly and as he spoke broke away from him, while his ragged jacket fell to the ground, exposing a scarecrow body covered with hideous scars.

'Burns!' Alec breathed. 'By the living God, they have burned him to the bone.'

Mistress Sugden snatched up the torn frayed jacket to wrap it about that fearful mutilated breast. As she did so Will tried to shake her off but only succeeded in dislodging the filthy rag he wore bound about his head with greasy hair hanging from under it.

And now it was Polly who shrieked. For the rag fell off and the dirty locks with it. William Trent's bone-white, hairless, scalped head shone in the firelight. He covered his face with his hands and sank to his knees. Too appalled to move, in silence, the three heard him begin to sob, while hopeless tears trickled from between his fingers.

Chapter Ten

They waited until the poor wretch had recovered himself somewhat, when Mistress Sugden took off her kerchief and bound it about his head. Alec offered his jacket but it was so ludicrously too big for Trent that the latter refused it with pathetic dignity and politeness. He seemed now to have recognised his sister and to have recovered completely from his initial fear of the visitors. His outburst might even have done him good, Mistress Sugden decided, when at last they left him. He had plenty of wood for his fire, stacked in a corner, and was not without food.

'In the morning we will go again and maybe persuade him to lodge with us in future where we may see to his wants.'

''Tis clothing he needs above all,' Polly said. She had been shocked by the filthy rags her uncle was wearing and had already decided that he must have a new jacket even if it meant sacrificing a blanket to provide material for it.

This discussion took place in their hut while they were trying to arrange their beds and dispose of their possessions in some sort of order. Discussing clothes for her brother made Mistress Sugden's thoughts turn to her loom and spinning wheel.

'I'll go see if they be landed yet,' Alec offered. 'The boats have been plying back and forth all evening, bringing provisions and stores. By the shouts we hear they are continuing into the night.'

He went to the door of the hut and looked out. Where before the night sky was brilliant with stars it was now clouded over, while a red glow shone through the haze and the acrid smell of burning swept over him and into the hut.

'Fire!' cried Mistress Sugden, springing up. 'It cometh from our landing place. Sandy…!'

But he was gone, running through the haze with a hand over his mouth. Soon his eyes were blinded by the smoke so that he could scarcely see his way, but he stumbled on, only too conscious that the wind, driving the smoke towards him, must be driving the fire too in that direction.

It had in fact been only a chance gust that had turned the

smoke, for it moved again just as he reached a group of frantic men beating at the ground, tearing at the smouldering ruins of huts to pile them together and form a gap across which the active flames could not leap.

Whatever had caused the blaze it was no time for questions, but for action. Leaving the group he had run into, whose labours were having their intended effect. Alec turned and ran towards the crowd that battled with leaping flames, beating at them with sticks, pulling at a stacked pile to drag away its parts.

'Dear God!' thought Alec, 'some fool or knave hath lit our stores! This is disaster, indeed!'

But he kept his anger and despair to himself, joining the new group with a strength and vigour ten times more effective than their feeble attempts. Copying the first party he had encountered he directed those about him to take what they had salvaged to a distance up wind and stack it there in charge of one who could be trusted to protect it. The light from the still raging fire was enough to work by. He snatched away and stamped out several torches brought by late-comers and which could only add to the present peril.

The work went on till dawn, when, the fires out, the damage done, exhausted men lay down where they had worked and slept until the cold woke them, when they staggered back to their huts if these still existed. Others, having taken salvaged stores to the Town Hall, sought shelter there.

A large part of the new provisions had gone, also many of the larger personal possessions of the newcomers, those articles they had not been able to carry when they went ashore. Much of the general equipment and tools had not yet been unloaded and so was saved. Mistress Sugden's loom and spinning wheel were among these and in due course were restored to her.

The most serious and dangerous damage concerned the loss of so many of the former tents and huts. Poor as they had been they had sheltered the surviving population of the settlement. Their occupiers were homeless as they had been when they first landed. And many of the newcomers were still un-housed.

Alec, who had gone back to his hut as soon as the fire was finally subdued, found the women still up and dressed. They had tended the fire and had managed to cook some porridge in the bowl that held the oats. They offered this to him but he waved it

away, saying he was too tired to eat.

'Eat you must or your strength will leave you,' Mistress Sugden scolded.

'We saved the oats for thee,' Polly added. 'We stinted ourselves.'

'Then eat thy fill now,' he told her. 'I cannot.'

'Great gormless fool!' she cried and burst into tears. To his own and Mistress Sugden's surprise he took back the bowl and ate.

Later they asked about the fire but he could tell them very little except that the hardship they had accepted would now be more severe.

It must have been their impatience to get at the food,' he said. 'In the dark, with torches, those near-starved wretches may have dropped a flame or sparks. The goods had been well stored and were bone dry to keep the grain from swelling and bursting the ship as I have heard can happen—'

'So our food is gone,' said Mistress Sugden, shaking her head at the greed and folly of mankind. 'So now we starve as Will hath starved these last weeks.'

'That we shall know later,' said Alec. His head was aching, his eyes burned, his ears sang, his limbs felt too heavy to move.

'Get thee to bed, lad,' Mistress Sugden told him. And Polly added, 'We have still a roof over us and for that we should thank Sandy.'

Thank the Lord for His mercy,' Mistress Sugden snapped. 'Who hath brought us through all these perils.'

Polly responded devoutly, but in her heart she was convinced that it was Alec who had saved them again. When he had managed to take himself to the other room she lay down on her mattress near her mother and drifted into a pleasant dream where her tall hero walked with her in a sunlit Yorkshire vale and told her of his love.

Later that morning Captain Newport with the Councillors inspected the damage. This was seen by daylight to be less disastrous than had appeared in the dark when smoke and flames seemed a true forecast of hell and many of the settlers believed their world had indeed come to a punishing end.

One of the younger gentlemen adventurers accompanied Captain Newport. He had already been named for the Council in

place of that Captain Gosnold who had died. This was greatly resented by one George Tucker, who had expected his own preferment.

Master Matthew Scrivenor was young and energetic. He exclaimed in robust terms at the poor state of the settlement.

'What have they been at, these lazy bastards, in the weeks and months we have battled with the seas on their behalf? Could they not have sown crops and reaped a harvest before winter? Must they for ever keep arse to ground and mouth open like the cuckoo, waiting to have it filled? Master President, can you not drive these laggards to work if only to set their lousy dwellings to rights?'

Captain Ratcliffe received this outburst with a sour smile and a shake of the head.

'There hath been much sickness,' he explained. 'Many died of it and they that recovered wanted the food to give them back their strength.'

'That hath not been the whole of it,' Master Councillor Martin put in. 'Mine own son died of the dysentery that took so many. But he did not receive all he might have done to save him. There hath been nothing but argument, dispute, factions formed, the gentlemen too proud to mind the artisan, the craftsman avoiding the jailbird—'

'There hath been no Christian spirit of charity,' interrupted the Reverend Master Hunt. 'It cannot be wondered at, for many are atheist and proclaim it. They rebel against our English Church law of attendance which they obey not. It is much to be deplored.'

So the argument continued as the President, the preacher, the principal councillors and the two new arrivals walked about the whole of the settlement, discovering many ruined huts, some totally destroyed, much squalor among those that escaped the fire and a good deal of genuine illness still afflicting the first settlers.

Captain Newport noted, and remarked upon it to Scrivenor, that the former president was not of their party but had shut himself into his own house with Mistress Forrest and her maid. Having heard the full story of Wingfield's imprisonment and Captain John Smith's danger, Matthew Scrivenor laughed aloud. He knew of Smith's background, his past adventures and his

total disregard for birth, position, manners or class.

'A worthy leader for this poor, confused rabble,' he said. 'A lone adventurer of the calibre we need for this enterprise.'

'Not lone any longer,' Captain Newport said, 'I had a fellow join me at Plymouth worth four of the usual recruits. You may have noted him aboard, Master Scrivenor. It seems he hath a past in some ways not unlike John Smith's, for I learned more of him in London than I expected. He is of humble birth, son of a Scots fish-merchant of Fife, grandson of a Scots fisherman. But worked for a City Alderman and had a certain slight connection with the Court. The Prince Henry knew and favoured him.'

'Then what horrid deed brought him here?'

'He killed my Lord Lennox's pimp, fled to Scotland, an outlaw, came back into England and took ship with us.'

'Where is he now?'

'Here,' said Captain Newport, who, while telling Alec's story had been leading young Scrivenor to the hut his valuable recruit had been allotted.

They found Alec, with two other men, standing before the cabin arguing and planning some drastic improvements. Of the two others one was a carpenter, the only survivor of his trade in the settlement the other a former blacksmith, a man of great strength demoralised by having no opportunity in this horseless community to follow his true calling.

As the two came up they heard Alec say to him, 'But ye understand the working of metals, dost not? Ye could turn us out grates for our fires and spits for our meat. Thou hast the tools to set up thy smithy?'

He broke off when he saw Newport and Scrivenor approach, the others of the party behind. He was full of his plans for improving the hut and while the smith and the carpenter, fired by his enthusiasm, put their minds to the work and even began to make some measurements, he explained what he proposed to do.

This was no less than to add another storey to the hut to turn it into a real house something like the Cow and Calf inn at Witton. The hut had been built upon good foundations, much better than many of the makeshift cabins at the other end of the settlement.

'We'll not have space on the ground for all the folk that be

coming,' Alec said. 'With the fire and all there'll be a great need to build and to build high will save ground room.'

'The lad's right' Captain Newport said to his companions. 'I have a mind to help his plan. Let us go find Captain Smith. 'Tis time the like souls came together.'

From that day a new spirit took hold of the little community. The fire seemed to have burned away much of the apathy that illness and privation had imposed upon it. With fresh food, much encouragement and also from sheer necessity a great spate of building began. The sailors from the ship, even the gentlemen, were set to cut down suitable trees, the settlers sawed them into proper lengths, using the skill they had learned in making clapboards for the first cargo to send to England. Several two-storey houses went up, though many still preferred the simpler form of hut. At the same time the palisade was strengthened and the Reverend Master Hunt managed to persuade his irreligious flock to repair the church on the side that had been destroyed in the fire.

Alec found in Captain John Smith a friend of a kind he had not looked for. Though Smith was no seaman he soon got Alec's story from him in fuller detail than Captain Newport.

'If you made boats on that Highland loch where they kept you a prisoner, you should be capable of building us a pinnace. We would welcome another and maybe another shallop, having but one of each as our sole transport over water when the barque sets out again, as she will when Master Newport hath his new cargo stowed.'

He made a face of such disgust as he said this that Alec laughed.

'Why such disfavour?' he asked?

'Because he thinks he hath discovered gold,' the Captain said angrily, 'and 'tis nought but gilded dirt.'

He explained that the samples Newport had carried to England before had been assayed and declared not to contain gold. My Lord Salisbury had confirmed this finding.

'If Master Secretary says so it must be true,' Alec said. 'He is a man of great wisdom and great integrity is my Lord Salisbury.'

'You know him?'

'I have met him, aye. At his great house, Theobalds, where he hath entertained our Jamie.'

‘You speak thus of the King?’

Alec looked surprised at the stiff way Captain Smith spoke. ‘Aye, so. We followed him all the way to England. Francis Leslie and I. But they all call him that in London. The Scots, I mean, maybe the English now, as well.’

After a moment’s silence, Smith said, ‘You should seek out Master Wingfield. He hath a great pride in his gentle birth, too great to allow him fellowship with lesser men. But thy familiarity with the greatest of all—Master Wingfield would be astonished.’

‘I have no wish to astonish any man,’ Alec said, turning away. ‘Also I hear Master Wingfield plans to go back to England. But about that pinnace—’

‘I did but jest,’ Captain Smith said, laying a friendly hand on Alec’s arm. ‘Come thee down to the water. We have the old pinnace ashore to careen her. Thou may’st see the construction. Matthew Scrivenor approves my project. And there is a shipwright among Master Newport’s crew who hath the proper plans. Come.’

So for several weeks the settlement, stirred into active life by the newcomers, resounded to the thump of axe on tree, the screech of double saw, the knock of hammer on nail. New frame houses rose over the ashes of the old and there was a great clearance of rubbish that had been dropped into the snow when the ground was too hard to bury it.

Captain Newport made a ‘State’ visit to Powhatan and renewed his acquaintance with the savage potentate, making him a present of an English boy of thirteen, whom he called his son, as a token of the peaceful intention of the colony. Like most of the Councillors he disapproved of Captain Smith’s active severity towards the natives. The London Company had advised kindness, but Smith knew from experience that the Indians were not to be trusted. Quite plainly they wanted to get rid of the foreigners. Smith both understood and sympathised with this wish but since he had come as a conqueror he intended to behave as such. He therefore continued to plan voyages of discovery in spite of much obstruction.

Though the cold persisted through March the days grew longer and the sun’s warmth melted the frosts of overnight showing vivid green patches of grass where the white carpet,

was melted away. Birds flew from the forest, great robins the size of English blackbirds and blue jays, bright as kingfishers at home; all eager to pick up any scraps of food the careless settlers threw outside their doors.

Little groups of Indians came too, not seeking food but, bringing it, turkeys and deer and those roots the settlers called 'earth apples' as well as corn. These they bartered for the cheap gewgaws the Company had sent out. Some managed to obtain swords by this method, the owners too greedy or too careless or too trusting to imagine the steel would ever be used against them.

Before the spring was fully established Captain Newport was ready to sail. Alec went to him on board the *Gift of God* as he waited with hatches closed on his cargo for the tide to turn in the river.

'I have a favour to ask, sir,' he said humbly, for he saw the captain was tired after the initial troubles, the calamity of the fire and the later obstruction he had met with on this visit.

'A passage home again?' asked Newport.

Alec flushed angrily.

'Nay, sir. I'll no' leave the work here for any man.'

'I'd not blame thee, lad,' Newport smiled wanly. 'Well, tell me the favour.'

'To speak a word of thanks to Master Angus Leslie for his kind letter—'

'Can'st not write it? I have too much already to remember.'

'I have neither paper nor pen nor ink, sir.'

Captain Newport fetched all three and laid them on the table. 'Make it short, Sandy,' he ordered. 'We sail on the hour.'

So Alec wrote briefly of his safe arrival, of the plight of the settlement as he found it and the rapid improvement now being made. He expressed strong hopes for his future in this land of exciting promise and his wish to know more of the welfare of his friends at home, particularly Francis. He signed the letter with his own name and formally, as a gentleman should.

'Nay, nay,' Captain Newport said, when Alec offered to let him read it. 'Seal it up, Sandy lad. Seal it up and I'll lock it away and put it out of mind until we sail into Tilbury in five weeks time if the wind serves and the storms be not too great.'

As he left the ship he saw Master Wingfield and Captain

Gabriel Archer, the so-called Recorder of the settlement, standing by the bulwarks. They turned away when they saw him so he passed deliberately close without a greeting or a word of farewell and saw Wingfield's cheek darken and Archer lay a restraining hand on his arm.

'They be no loss,' Alec told Mistress Sugden at supper that evening. 'They it was who made the hubbub our good Captain Smith calls a garboil. And an excellent word for that stirring up of evil passions and threatened murders, though Wingfield too was like to suffer death for his arrogance.'

'They did shoot one of the councillors, I am told,' said Polly brightly. 'And him put on the council in London.'

'Captain Kendall, that was?'

'Aye, a proper villain, they say, who would have sold our settlement to Spain. But as they was ahanging that poor wretch of a blacksmith for some lesser fault, he up and accused this Kendall. So they let him off and shot the traitor.'

'A fine stirring tale for a maiden to relish!' Alec laughed. 'And mark thee, mistress, how thy daughter speaks of "our" settlement! Where learned ye all this, Poll?'

She was blushing scarlet at his banter but answered bravely enough, 'From Mistress Forrest or rather from Anne Burrows, who had it from the lady.'

'They leave again with Master Wingfield I take it, seeing her ladyship's cousin, Gosnold, is no longer living?'

'That she will not,' Mistress Sugden declared. 'I was with her all day until now, arranging Master Wingfield's house, which he hath bequeathed her, to her liking. She told me, but spread it not abroad for her safety, that this Wingfield had a fine store of food hid away that he dared not take out before the people. He never went short while they starved.'

Alec sprung to his feet, but the two women clung to him.

'Alack, what have I said!' Mistress Sugden cried. 'She swore me to silence and here have I blabbed it out! When the ship sails she told me she means to hand it all in secret to the preacher so that Master Hunt may give it by small parts to those most in need. None other must hear of it or the good lady will be put in peril.'

Alec, whose first thought had been to stop the ship and have Wingfield hanged at the yardarm, gave way to their pleadings

and sat down again. Another death, another of Captain Smith's garboils, would do no good. Let the villain and Archer, the would-be murderer with his twisted law, go back to England. With a great feeling, besides, of the value of distance, he hoped they would never be troubled again by those two.

The sense of distance, of the immensity of this strange new world, came upon Alec many times in the days that followed and chiefly through his association with William Trent.

When Mistress Sugden had gone to her brother again on the morning after their arrival and the fire that followed, he had been able to speak to her, though she was not quite sure, even then, if he knew her for his sister. He was clearly grateful for the gifts she brought, of food and clothing and for her insistence upon cleaning his dreadful little hovel. After a few days she invited him to join them when their new house would be ready, the improvements finished. He did not respond to that offer, but when the second storey was erected, the first of its kind in James Town, Mistress Sugden caught sight of Will, standing outside the door, gazing upwards. She went to him, calling his name and he cried, 'Meg! Meg! Am I come home?' and burst into tears for the second time.

He joined them then, his memory roused by the sight of a building so like in general shape to the farmhouse of his youth, though made of wood, not mellow honey-grey stone. He acknowledged his sister, he listened to news of Witton, but gave no account of his own wanderings.

Until one day, when he had taken Alec to visit the local werowance, or headman, of the Pamunkeys, a friendly tribe who lived locally under the overlordship of Powhatan, with whom the settlement had now signed a treaty of peace.

The visit was prompted by Alec's wish to find seeds for planting. Newport had brought some sacks of suitable grain for sowing, but part had been burned and part stolen for food. In any case the local varieties would be more likely to succeed, both Meg Sugden and Will insisted.

The track to the wigwam of the werowance, Opecancanough lay through the forest, a dense wall of great trees on either side that seemed to close in behind and stand against them before as they moved along. Alec was frankly nervous; he was armed with a pistol, an unfamiliar weapon to him, but knew it would be of

little aid, even skilfully used, against a planned ambush. He was astonished at Will's courage in risking another capture and he was equally afraid for his own safety.

When they came out from the forest into the clearing round the Indian village Alec saw that the spring had truly arrived. Fruit trees in blossom, lilacs and dogwood made a picture that stirred his heart so long starved of natural colour. He stood amazed while Will went forward to find the Pamunkey chief.

Later, presenting Alec, Will spoke to Opecancanough in his own language. He explained their quest. Alec produced the necessary price in beads and other gewgaws and they received leather bags of peas, beans and corn with a promise of plants of tobacco and gourds and pumpkins as the season advanced. They smoked a pipe of peace, sitting on the ground and passing it to one another in turn. Will made a speech of thanks and farewell and they started on the track for home.

When they had gone a few miles, however, Will turned aside, saying, 'Follow me.' He led Alec to a small clearing at the centre of which lay a flat stone.

'I fell over it as I walked, not knowing my way,' Will said. 'Look what is carved there.'

Alec stooped and read. Chipped in the surface was a date and an arrow pointing the way they had just come.

'What …? Why…?'

'They tell me there was a settlement of white men by the sea, but it did not prosper. This was a long time ago. The tale hath come down, from the grandfathers and grandmothers. The people rose and destroyed their settlement and started to walk inland. They left this stone as they passed. There is another stone far to the west with another date. There may be more.'

'Roanoke!' Alec said straightening up. 'The lost colony they call it. I heard the tale in London when we spoke of Raleigh.'

But Will was not listening. He was trudging back to the track and Alec ran to join him, for the feeling of immensity had come down upon him again, a realisation of a land of limitless forest, of immense rivers and a picture of a small defenceless alien group walking doggedly into the unknown, leaving a flat stone at long intervals as the only mark of their passage.

On April 20th, 1608, ten days after Captain Newport left for home, a tall barque sailed into the James River. She was

Newport's sister ship *Phoenix*, with Captain Nelson, her master on the poop.

When he came ashore he explained that by reason of sickness among his crew and passengers and his need for water he had stayed for the winter on a small island in the West Indies.

The *Phoenix* was most welcome in James Town. She brought forty more settlers, all hale and hearty from their prudent voyage, besides stores that were added most generously to the common need. Captain Nelson was sorry to have missed Newport and decided to go back to England as soon as he had a suitable cargo.

So once more the gentlemen as well as the commoners turned to tree felling and splitting and loaded *Phoenix* with red cedar. Captain Smith wrote a long account of his recent explorations, trials and dangers. He described the visiting Indians as arrant thieves deserving hanging, but spared by order of a majority of Council. He reported that the boy hostage, Thomas Savage, had left Powhatan and returned to James Town, to everyone's relief.

Captain Smith enclosed with this letter a set of maps, very valuable and remarkably accurate, as later voyages proved.

On June 2nd *Phoenix* sailed for home bearing, as well as the red cedar, Councillor John Martin, who still complained of the illness that had carried off his son.

Chapter Eleven

All that early spring while Mistress Sugden settled to the work of her new house and the care of her brother, Polly found less to do at home. There were no cows to milk and so no dairy. There were very few pots and pans to polish. Alec had laid a wooden floor over the previous hard-packed mud, but his work on the new pinnace had taken him away before he had planed it down and sanded it, so the scrubbing was hard, disagreeable and unrewarding.

Consequently Polly, though willing enough, found her mother less and less able to employ her in the house, though stricter than ever in forbidding her to wander abroad alone.

'If I may not help thee, Mother,' Polly complained, 'why may I not tend our garden patch? Thou know'st I can hoe as well as any boy and the seeds Uncle Will hath brought grow bravely. Happen we may have barley enough to brew us some ale at harvest.'

'Ask thy uncle, child,' Mistress Sugden answered. 'The seasons in this heathen land be not as we know them at home. Already the sun be hot as June; high in t' sky too and it not yet May. I reckon the blades thou'st seen be nought but this everlasting corn, as they name it.'

'That will not cook soft,' Polly declared, with a face of disgust.

'Will saith we mun eat it from the cob before it be well ripe, as the natives do. I have a mind to try it that way.'

'May I go hoe our plot, then?' Polly asked, thinking her mother might now relent.

'That thou may *not*!'

Then I will go visit Mistress Forrest. She knows how to employ me, mending her gowns and Anne's.'

Mistress Sugden had no objection to this. The former president's house was within sight of her own door and she could watch her daughter's progress thither until she was safely within doors.

Polly and Anne Burrows had become close friends. They had, after the first few days of sea-sickness, been drawn together in

companionship on the long voyage to this outlandish place, as they considered it. Neither would have stayed there a day longer if they had been given the choice. In fact Anne had cried almost unceasingly for two days after Mistress Forrest had decided not to accompany Master Wingfield when Captain Newport sailed for England. It did not occur to either girl to disobey parent or employer, but they grumbled heartily when they were together.

'This folly can never succeed,' Polly declared on the morning she had been denied a visit to their plantation. 'Do we not lack every necessity? Without beasts to plough with, to give us milk and butter and cheese, to supply dung for the earth—'

'Thou'rt a true farmer's daughter,' Mistress Forrest said, coming upon the two girls as they sat stitching.

'That I am, madam,' Polly said with some pride. 'And right gladly would I tend our poor plants, but my mother forbids me to go outdoors alone.'

'And rightly so in this company of men, to whom you twain must be a sore temptation,' said Mistress Forrest frankly.

The girls blushed and exchanged glances. When Mistress Forrest, having inspected their work and made one or two suggestions left them together again, Anne said, 'She keeps me confined as closely as thy mother, Poll, but yet I have already an admirer I do not altogether hate.'

She giggled as she spoke and then, to forestall Polly's evident curiosity she said, 'Hast not one thyself, Poll? Did he not follow thee and thy mother into this unknown, unfriendly spot?'

Polly's expression changed. Her cheeks paled, she turned her face away.

'Sandy's mind was made up or ever my mother thought to seek out Uncle Will. He hath met with great perils, great hardships. He hath no thought for me or any wish for a wife. Mayhap there is some great sorrow in that past he never speaks of. There is indeed a mystery. He hath never told us fully why he changed his name after we left Plymouth, nor which be the true one.'

'But he told thy mother!' Anne exclaimed. 'He was an outlaw for killing a great lord's servant and he killed again in the Highlands of Scotland. I think he be too dangerous for a husband.'

'He is as gentle as a lamb,' Polly protested, defending him.

But Anne only laughed at her. Polly tried again but she faltered and could not go on. She remembered her early daydreams in which Sandy Nimmo, as he now called himself, walked with her about the garden of the Cow and Calf and told her of his love. She remembered with bitterness spoiling her gratitude how he had saved her from Ben Flinders who would have forced her into marriage. He had punished Ben so that the evil-intentioned lout had not come near her again; he had been kind, taking her to the edge of the harvest field and watching her reach the inn. But he had not comforted her as she longed for him to do. He was always kind, never loving. So now she hung her head, while her tears fell on the garment she was sewing.

Anne scarcely noticed her companion's distress. She was longing to confide in her and had merely sought a suitable opening. When Polly failed to give her one she said tartly, 'Well, well, so Sandy holds no interest for thee and makes I suppose no advances. Not thus my John.'

Polly roused herself at this direct news.

'Thy John! Who be he, pray?'

'John Laydon. One of them as hath been here since the settlement began. He attended upon Master Wingfield but had no more wish to go back home with him than my mistress. So now he works here, carrying water and firing and suchlike services. He hath a small hut just within the palisade and a shed near the river where he makes glass. He saith he will glaze our windows by midsummer if he can get the lattice frames built for them.'

'What is he then, this John? A gentlewoman's attendant or a witch, to make glass windows from the air.'

'From sand and wood ash, thou ignorant country wench!' laughed Anne.

'He told thee this, I'll be bound,' Polly answered, 'I'll swear thou knew'st it not before.'

John Laydon certainly knew his trade and had brought out with him enough of the right tools to pursue it. He had only taken employment with Master Wingfield to support himself until his glass became profitable. He had not asked for money, for there was nothing to buy in the settlement. But he had rightly judged that the Council, having control of the stores,

would not go short of food themselves.

John did not pretend to consider his fellows. He had been born independent; he had worked hard as a boy apprentice to a master glazier. When he developed ideas unfamiliar to his master and the latter refused to accept them, they quarrelled, John ran away and after trying in vain to get a living, had joined the would-be settlers of the London Company. He had been reared on the simple principle of each man for himself, sink or swim. In James Town he was not exactly swimming, but yet treading water with his head well above it.

Anne's feeling for her admirer was less romantic than Polly's was for Alec. She was older than the farmer's daughter. She was a few years older than her swain, but a Londoner herself, as he was, and more sophisticated than either of her two friends. She was very willing to be loved and quite prepared to fall in love herself provided it would be to her advantage. Even at home John Laydon would be a desirable husband. Here, she knew, he would be a prize.

Mistress Forrest was well aware of this situation and of her maid's friendship with Polly Sugden. She admired and liked John as an honest tradesman and an upstanding young man. Sandy Nimmo had intrigued her greatly by reason of his strange position in the country folk's household. She summoned him to her presence, determined to discover to her satisfaction the story of his coming to James Town. There was little indeed to interest, far less amuse her, in those mainly squalid surroundings. She hoped to relieve her present boredom at his expense.

But she had met her match. Alec, in his turn, admired Mistress Forrest for staying in the settlement when she had every inducement to leave it with Master Wingfield. He too had a wish to satisfy his curiosity about the lady, since he had had no opportunity to do so on the voyage, when Captain Newport kept the four women so close it was a standing joke and secret irritation to most of the men on board.

Consequently he put on a clean shirt and his most respectable pair of breeches, found his pork-pie hat, long discarded, and made his way with Polly, who was to introduce him, to Mistress Forrest's house. Very sensible, the weather being by now both hot and steamy, he had discarded his tight-fitting, high-collared jacket, working on the vegetable patch or at the building of the

pinnace naked to the waist, and preserving his few remaining shirts for the house and for visits to the houses of friends such as Captain John Smith.

Polly brought him to Mistress Forrest who greeted him with friendly condescension, making a gesture at the same time to Polly, who withdrew.

Alec, inwardly amused, bowed in the manner he had learned at King James's court, but a trifle awkwardly, not having used such airs since he fled from London nearly two years before.

Mistress Forrest was impressed. She begged him to be seated and leaning forward a little from her own rough stool, said 'Our Company here lacks the grace that you, sir, are evidently familiar with. Of the gentlemen adventurers that came here to seek their fortunes, to find gold and other treasure or a passage west to the great sea that lies beyond this place, many have died, some have deserted. We are much the poorer for it.'

'Nay, madam,' Alec answered. 'I think they be no loss. For here is no easy fortune. Captain Smith is convinced there be no gold. I believe there is only a Irving, but a good, free, adventurous living, for any man that truly seeks it, maybe needs it.'

'Thou hath need of it?' she asked softly.

'Aye, madam,' he told her, but said no more and she understood that no more would be said at this visit, perhaps never.

Nor had she courage to pursue the attempt when she saw his mouth close in a firm line and his blue eyes grow hard.

To keep him with her a little longer Mistress Forrest said, quietly, 'Free we all are here, but many use this freedom for idleness. In all those months while Captain Newport returned to England, made his report and got together his stores and new recruits, ourselves in fact, those hundred men neither builded nor sowed. It hath astonished me that they could do so little, even for their own comfort, even for their safety.'

'They were idle for the most part because they were sick,' Alec said gravely. 'Sick, aye; slain by an enemy they knew not how to fight. An enemy more deadly than these capricious naturals, who feed us one week and shoot their arrows at us the next.'

'An enemy we have still no means to subdue,' Mistress Forrest said, after a silence. 'They tell me our own shipmates, we

newcomers, have been attacked by that silent, unseen foe.'

'More than that, madam. Know ye not they fall daily and many have already died of the ague, the fever or the bloody flux?'

'Is it indeed so grave?'

Alec nodded. Already the ranks of tile newcomers had been thinned and though this promised a better daily ration of food for the healthy until the harvest time of the corn, it spoke very ill for the continuance of a colony in that place. Already William Trent had brought news from his friend the werowance of the Pamunkeys that the settlement farther north at Sagadahoc had collapsed and its survivors had embarked in their boats and gone farther north still. Nothing more was known of their fate.

'I have led a sheltered, complaining and uncertain existence since I landed here,' Mistress Forrest said when Alec remained silent. 'As idle as those n'er-do-wells and jail birds we complain of. I see now that the old way of life is not possible. Not even desirable—'

She broke off, her eyes filling with tears at a sharp memory of former times.

'What brought ye here, madam?' Alec asked, gently.

'A great loss and a sore grief,' she answered, looking at him with the same sternness he had showed to her own question. 'Mayhap God hath punished me for an early happiness I had in no way deserved.'

'We are all in His hands,' Alec said, thinking of his own childhood's misery in a household where the Devil and Hell took precedence over God's Mercy and even the remotest possibility of a future Heaven.

Seeing that Mistress Forrest had retreated into her past and was no more willing to disclose it than he was to speak of his own adventures, he got up and took a formal most respectful leave of her. She had shown she was a true settler, having the courage to make a new life without any conception of the full meaning of her decision, but yet determined to adapt herself. When he reached home he told Mistress Sugden of the interview and begged her to make a friend of the gentlewoman.

'Happen she'll disdain my friendship,' the former said. 'I'll have no truck wi' grand manners and such-like silliness.'

'Show her thy loom and the new thread Polly spins when she

can tear herself away from young Anne Burrows.'

Mistress Sugden laughed, but she was touched by Alec's concern for the lonely woman. They were about of an age, she knew. Anne would soon be married, according to the Reverend Master Hunt, who gossiped freely with his small congregation of believers. Then perhaps Polly would find a suitor, too. She dared not hope for Alec, who had shown no more than a brotherly interest in Poll. But with both the girls wed as in the natural order of things they would be, she and Mistress Forrest, middle-aged if not elderly, would have to depend upon one another.

So Mistress Forrest's advance bore a very different fruit from that she had intended when she made Alec's acquaintance. She too had brought with her a spinning wheel for Anne's use as well as some linen cloth and embroidery wools for her own. But seeing no sheep and therefore no wool, either in the settlement or outside it, she had thought no more of finding material for dyeing, stitching and making cloth, Polly, on the other hand, working occasionally in the plantation outside the palisade, when Alec took her there, had come across a plant with a fine white blob of hairs attached to its seeds at the head. More in jest than earnest, she had gathered a quantity of these tufts and taken them home washed them, fixed the 'Wool' as she called it, on to her spindle and spun a thread that was smooth and white and strong as the sheep's wool yarn she had made at home. Mistress Forrest, seeing this product, copied it and before long Mistress Sugden set up her loom and began to weave a cloth that was both light and cool and more suitable for shirts and dresses than the heavy wear that was now oppressing the men as high summer approached.

And so the friendship Alec desired grew up naturally between the two women, cemented in late July by an event that narrowly escaped dire tragedy.

Alec and Will, seeing such a splendid use was put to a plant they had considered a tiresome weed, had planted the discarded seeds from the fluffy heads the girls had gathered. They chose a piece of land on the forest side of the town where the weed already grew freely. For this reason and also because they did not want to use land cultivated for food they planted their seeds in view of the forest but also not very far from the gates of the palisade.

When this crop, now called cotton, was ripe they took Mistress Sugden and Polly with them to harvest it. They had gathered some of it into a large osier basket Will had made and were turning to go back to the town when he stopped short, listened, bade the others be silent and then in an urgent, fearful whisper told them to run for their lives. Shouldering the basket and seizing Poll with his free hand he set off at a good pace. Alec did the same with Mistress Sugden but partly from her age and partly her long skirts that she had not girded up as her daughter had done, she was not able to make the same pace and soon began to flag and gasp for breath.

By this time the distant sounds Will's keen and practised ear had heard grew louder. They had been seen and what had been a guarded approach in order to surround them, now became an open and deadly pursuit to capture or kill.

'Go thou on, Sandy!' Mistress Sugden cried. 'I but hinder thee. Go on and save thyself and God bless thee for all thou'st done for me and mine.'

Alec wasted no time on argument. He said briefly, 'Pick up thy skirts, dame!' and as she did so hoisted her upon his back and with one hand under her seat and the other grasping the hands she had flung round his neck he set off at a much increased speed in spite of his burden.

Meanwhile Polly and William had reached the palisade. At first the guards there, for a watch was always kept by day and night, made to close the great doors and mount a firing party upon the platform built beside them. They disregarded Will's pleading as that of the madman they still regarded him. But Polly, seeing Captain John Smith approaching to discover the cause of the hubbub, screamed to him that Sandy Nimmo and her mother were also fleeing the Indians and could be seen now in the distance across the empty ground between the palisade and the forest.

Smith ordered the gates instantly to be opened wide again, the guards to prepare their muskets but hold their fire for fear they might hit the pursued rather than their pursuers. He himself ran out to cover the desperate retreat and with the greatest boldness, courage and skill checked the first wave of the attackers as they left the cover of the trees.

The check was only partial. Though the watchers on the

platform saw a packed mass move back among the tall trunks, half a dozen brown, almost naked figures, daubed with red and white paint and wearing war feathers on their heads, ran from cover and took aim with their arrows at the moment Captain Smith fired.

A couple fell. Alec passed the captain, staggering from side to side in his growing exhaustion, but still gripping his burden tightly.

'Fire!' Captain Smith yelled from the midst of a further flight of arrows.

Alec was within a few yards of the gates, making a final effort, when Mistress Sugden suddenly screamed, her head fell forward on to his shoulder and he felt her hands go limp in his grasp.

'In, lad!' he heard Smith's voice behind him. 'I have her. She'll not fall. In, quick.'

He stumbled on, barely conscious of what he was doing, but aware that helping bands were partly supporting the stricken woman. He heard the great gates close, the volley of gunfire from the platform, the smell of burnt powder. Then his hands were drawn away by other hands and he fell to the ground and lay gasping, feeling his heart pounding so fast it was like to burst through his chest wall.

But not for long. His breath returned, his heart slowed, he was on his feet again, pushing his way through the crowd that had gathered about Mistress Sugden, whose white face and closed eyes sent a shock of concern through him, that increased to terror when he saw her injury.

For she was lying half upon her left side with the long shaft of an arrow standing from her back below the shoulder blade. Captain Smith was on his knees beside her. Will Trent held her right arm away from her body.

In an instant Alec was on his knees, too, with his knife out, cutting up the seam of her bodice and sleeve.

'I felt the blow when the arrow struck,' he muttered, as he worked. 'But the head did not reach me. Pray God it be not still within her.'

'No,' Will said, strangely calm. 'She lives. She does not cough blood. The angle of the shaft is towards the spine.'

Captain Smith said nothing but continued to support the fallen woman. He had long since made up his mind about Alec's skill

and strength in several fields. He had wished to take him on the voyage of exploration in Chesapeake Bay from which he had only just returned, but though the young Scot had been very willing he had declared his duty was still to look after the two women until Will was more surely recovered.

About this Will Trent, the so-called madman. Smith had less knowledge. But he had much past experience of prisoners, having been one himself in Turkey long ago, also the year before in the hands of the Indian high chief, Powhatan, and only a short time ago in those of the usurping Council of the settlement, when Wingfield was deposed. He knew the vile practices of the Indians upon the bodies of their victims, as they tortured them to death. This William Treat had learned their ways during his mysterious wanderings. There might be useful knowledge to be learned from him.

When Alec had the bodice free and turned back it was clear that Will's conclusion was the right one. The arrow had passed through the flesh outside the rib cage. Its point was just visible to the right of the ample breast. And Mistress Sugden's colour was returning, her breathing quickened and she began to moan with pain.

'Think ye we can move her?' Alec asked Will. 'We have to pull that out and 'twere best done before she come fully to herself.'

Will nodded, so with Captain Smith's help they lifted up Mistress Sugden, carried her to her house and laid her on her bed.

'Where's Poll?' Alec asked, looking around. 'She should be here. We need hot water, a basin, some of that cotton we gathered so blithely before those devils attacked us.'

It was Mistress Forrest who answered, stepping forward from the fireplace where she had been working.

'She fainted when she saw her mother's injury,' the lady said severely. 'Anne tends her in the room above. You may order me, sir. I have seen wounds before. I shall not collapse myself.'

No one disputed Alec's right to do as he pleased. There was now but one new doctor in the settlement, the first physician to go there having died during the late autumn. In any case he would not have undertaken surgical work. So Alec had the men hold Mistress Sugden firmly while he first pushed back the flesh from the point of the arrow until he had the barb clear. When he

had cut this from the shaft, he drew the latter from the woman's back.

During the operation she cried out once and then fainted away again. The two wounds bled freely, which was not a bad thing, Will said, though there was little chance of poison being carried into his sister's body since tile arrow had to pass through such a thickness of clothing before it struck the flesh.

Captain Smith smiled grimly at this. Heavy clothes might add to the settlers' discomfort but they had their uses, seemingly. He had not looked at it in this light before. On his more dangerous expeditions he and his gentlemen companions had worn their body armour. It was a fine protection against arrows and its brightness frightened the natives.

When the operation was completed and the two small wounds stanched with cotton waste, the captain suggested cautery.

'Nay,' Will said. '''Tis best we do not close this long wound at either end. 'Twill discharge, I doubt not, but 'tis better so than to seal up the noxious humours within.'

'Master Trent speaks wisely,' Captain Smith agreed. 'Moreover the poor creature hath suffered enough from this most necessary surgery. She could scarcely endure a fresh agony.'

Mistress Sugden opened her eyes at these words.

'Hark to him, Sandy,' she said in a faint but resolute voice. 'Bind me up and let me rest. But first give me to drink for I die of thirst.'

They did as she asked and then left her to the care of Mistress Forrest, who promised to stay with her until Polly was fit to take on the nursing. Alec suggested asking the physician, newly arrived, to prescribe for her, but she would have none of him.

The men went away to see how the guards were faring. They found that the attack had collapsed when the Indians lost their quarry. They had melted away into the forest taking their dead and wounded with them.

'We owe you our thanks, sir,' Will said to Captain Smith. 'Without your help I think both Meg and Sandy here had been lost.'

'I say amen to that,' Alec added.

Captain Smith laughed.

'We must all thank one another,' he said, 'for each played a soldier's part and that goes for the gallant lady too. But my

sortie was but an act of my profession, whereas you three rose grandly to your peril. So let us each give thanks to Our Lord who hath this day methinks saved more than our lives.'

He turned and stumped off, a sturdy, fearless, active figure, greying head erect, a springy step, careless of praise. But he was upset by this attack. The cotton plants were an experiment and a successful one. They should have been grown in the plantation behind the little town, guarded by it and the river. Not such good soil maybe, but hidden from the forest and safe from attack except by water.

Alec watched him go. The captain had said truth. He had hinted at the precarious state of their settlement where the leadership was so weak and the community so lacking in aim or achievement, except for the ceaseless expeditions to gather food or seek for precious metals. Surely it was time this man, a born leader, took over from the weak, self-important Captain Ratcliffe, whom all despised, and but a few flattered. Among these George Tucker took a forward place. An envious, sly schemer, Alec knew, one nursing his ambition secretly and therefore dangerous. Hating Smith.

'While we have the captain there is hope for us,' Alec said aloud, turning to Will. But the strange man was not listening.

They were not the Pamunkey braves,' he said. They must be others, Paspahegh maybe, who claim this land as their own. Or seek revenge for some injury done them. They will come again.'

Chapter Twelve

Alec's opinion of President Ratcliffe was shared by all thinking men of the settlement. Not only was he inadequate as any sort of leader, political or military, but he had over the last weeks developed a very strange, arrogant manner worse even than that of Master Wingfield, putting himself forward and demanding services more suitable to a king's state than that of chief councillor to a ragamuffin community settled precariously on a hostile shore.

This behaviour had increased in wildness during Captain Smith's absence. On his return, the day before Mistress Sugden's wounding, matters had come to a head. Two days later the Council, with Smith again of their number, took heart and courage. Ratcliffe was deposed, the explorer promoted to the office of President in his place. But since Ratcliffe's term of office had not yet quite run out, Matthew Scrivenor was elected to serve for the intervening two months.

All this Alec learned at a later date. He was fully occupied with his friends. Mistress Forrest continued to nurse Meg Sugden, since Polly was only shakily recovered from the shock of seeing her mother's injury and Will seemed strangely indifferent to it, though willing enough to arrange the meals which Alec cooked on the new hearth he and the blacksmith had built. And it was Will who suggested giving his sister an infusion of sassafras, a shrub whose twigs cut into short lengths and steeped in boiling water were much used by the Indians.

On the fourth day, when Mistress Sugden's initial weakness and fever had abated and her wounds, though discharging freely, had produced no alarming features, Alec was approached by Captain Smith who told him what had taken place in the Council Chamber and explained that young Scrivenor had undertaken to guide matters in the settlement during the next two months.

'For I must complete my work,' the captain explained. 'The northern part of this great bay calls me, for it is an extraordinary awe-inspiring and stupendous work of nature. I must complete

my maps, discover how further exploration can be planned in this vast country. Also,' he added, smiling, 'I would dispose of myself elsewhere for this interval of two months. I am elected to be President but may not take up my office until Captain Ratcliffe's term be ended. So now I look for bold spirits and strong arms to join me in the enterprise. Not all who have just returned with me are willing to start out again so soon.'

'When is this "soon"?' asked Alec.

'In two days. The barge we travelled in before is newly scoured, her bottom tarred, her seams caulked with cotton waste Mistress Forrest sent me for the purpose. 'Twas she told me thou'st used it for the new pinnace.'

'Aye, so. We have builded one pinnace and begun a second. 'Tis madness to go hungry with the sea at hand so full of fish for the taking.'

Captain Smith nodded vigorously.

'Thou shalt come with me in the barge,' he said. 'It was to ask thee I am here now.'

It was said in the form of a request, an offer. But Alec took it as the command he understood was intended.

But he hesitated, thinking of the Sugdens: Meg still in danger from her wound, Will unreliable, Polly too soft, too simple, too unfitted for the hazards of their stark existence.

'I commend thy loyalty,' Captain Smith said, 'but I cannot linger. Master Scrivenor will see they come to no harm from neglect or any ill deed within the settlement. But we must sail in two days, going north at slack water on the ebb.'

'I will be there,' Alec promised.

When he gave the news to the Sugdens they made no objection. In fact Will seemed pleased and the two women were angry with his suggestion that they might suffer by his absence; especially Polly, who was already ashamed of her former weakness.

'Take not so much pride in thy strength,' she said sharply. 'Twas God's doing to give it thee, not thine.'

He laughed, pleased with this unusual display of spirit; that made Polly angrier still so that she refused to say goodbye to him which Alec in his turn resented bitterly, when he believed he should have been indifferent.

The expedition set off at the beginning of the last week in

July, in sweltering heat, Captain Smith and six of the new gentlemen adventurers in their short cloaks over their doublets, their pork-pie hats on their heads and carrying with them their body armour, brightly scoured. Smith had found the armour very effective on the recent voyage, both in repelling arrows and in terrifying the hostile natives they met as they penetrated the Potomac River. Alec, too, had borrowed armour to take with him and carried his own sword, the first time he had worn it, except for show, since he bought it in Plymouth before he sailed.

The barge had a couple of short masts with lug sails and six rowers upon each side. She was an open vessel, covered over at night by a long tarpaulin, under which the whole party slept in discomfort or hid during a threatened attack, when they held their fire until the enemy was near enough to make it deadly.

They cruised for a full six weeks, both to the head of the bay and up the rivers they found there, always seeking a clear way into the interior of the country and a change of scene from the forest, the broad expanse of water upon which they moved and the inevitable mountain and waterfall that always turned them back from their westward thrusts. As they moved north up the bay the population on the shores and near the banks of the river grew sparse, until for more than a week they found themselves alone in a wilderness of rock, forest and falling water that seemed to the lowly rowers to be leading them to their doom and to the gentlemen adventurers to be fallen into a profitless exertion.

For they still sought treasure, in precious metals or precious stones. Captain Smith had seen articles of silverware at the court of Powhatan, so there must be silver in these hills if they could come by it. From time to time some of them left the barge to dig, but they had little knowledge to guide them and this enterprise came to nothing. Except to show their presence to the Indians and provoke a few fierce attacks which they were able to repulse, though not altogether without loss.

It was after one such skirmish, successfully won by Captain Smith's tactical skill, boldness and great severity in his punishment of the attackers, that Alec learned more of his former exploits. The settlement had already adopted as a legend the tale of his capture by Powhatan, his great danger of execution at the hands of the high chief and his narrow escape

from death when Powhatan's daughter Pocahontas pleaded for his life with such passion that her father was moved to release him.

'She was but a child at the time,' Alec was told. 'About twelve summers. But beautiful, or so he says, and who would not, being beholden to her in such manner.'

Certainly not John Smith, Alec thought. He still had a great admiration for the captain, but he saw that the present expedition, though valuable as a map-making enterprise, served little purpose in promoting the new settlement. In their small way they were repeating the pattern that had been followed from the beginning. They had not altered the aims laid down by the London Company and they had consumed their stores without making any effort, beyond some barter of valueless beads for corn, to supply their increasing need.

Alec approached Captain Smith.

'They tell me our food store is near finished, sir,' he began. 'I know the men be hungry and have begun to eat roots and such like that make them sick and give them colic. Yet there is an abundance of fish we can take with no difficulty at all.'

'Which may also destroy us by the poison they carry,' answered the captain. 'Know you not I took a great flat fish that reared at me from the water as I hooked him and plunged his sharp tail in my arm. I swelled from fingers to shoulder and half my side. I felt my hour had come and 'twas time to make my peace with God before I sank into the coma that precedes death. I even gave orders for my burial. But the good Dr Bagnall who was with us found a healing oil that cured the dreadful inflammation and a draught that gave me merciful relief from the pain that was driving me from my senses. So look to it you do not catch us another creature wrought by the Devil out of hell as I fully believe.'

'I'll not bring such a one aboard us,' Alec promised. But he took Captain Smith's words as permission to provide the much needed sea food. He sampled each new kind he caught before letting the others eat it. There were many they were all familiar with at the settlement, where more would have been used as food if it had been dried properly or salted down to keep it. But again the ignorance and laziness of so many of the settlers had prevented the proper use of fish as of so many easily-won and

abundant sources of native food.

The barge arrived back at James Town in the first week of September. Master Scrivenor had governed well during Smith's absence, though he had not had an easy time of it. Deaths by disease or accident had continued to be heavy. Scarcely had a new settler become accustomed to the conditions in the little town than he fell into a fever, from which he recovered with difficulty. Besides this some of the stores had been spoiled by rain and there had been some grumbling and threats at the reduction of the daily rations that had been the natural consequence of the neglect and carelessness. But no more effort was put into production in the plantation, where a meagre harvest did little credit to those who had planted it.

More dangerous even than these disasters and irritating disappointments was the behaviour of the deposed President. Scrivenor had uncovered a plot promoted by Ratcliffe to restore him to the power he still believed due to him as of right. His few followers disliked Matthew Scrivenor for his youth and energy and also feared the return of Captain Smith whose arrival would bring an end to their indolence.

It brought an end to more than that, for with his customary rough, uncompromising decision Smith clapped the rebellious souls in irons and unravelled the whole disreputable fabric of the plot under threat of instant hanging. The plotters were not inclined to risk their necks for so weak and arrogant a leader as Ratcliffe. They were released and set to preparing tar and pitch for a cargo for England. Deposits of these valuable commodities had been discovered in a marshy patch near the plantation.

Ratcliffe was kept in captivity. His term of office being now legally run out, Captain Smith was made President on September 10th, 1608.

Alec took no part in these high politics. On landing from the barge he hurried to the Sugdens' house in a sudden access of guilty feeling for having deserted his friends while Mistress Sugden's life was in danger.

But he found her well and cheerful, fully convalescent from her wound, though the scars were still tender, with that in her back not quite fully healed.

'Did not Dr Bagnall see to it?' Alec asked. The President was attended by him for a poison sting and saved from death, he

swears.'

'Nay, he swore he could do nothing, but Will procured lotions and salves from that Pamunkey chief who favours him,' she explained with a laugh. 'I'd had nowt to do wi' them had I not thought to be at death's door and craving aid more to go hence to God than stay in this world and suffer.'

Alec was too moved to speak, so he put both arms round her and hugged her close until she cried out that he would re-open her wound or suffocate her.

'The path of the arrow is fixed now to the ribs,' Will said gravely. 'She cannot well lift that arm nor ever will.'

Alec, all his surgical interest roused, begged to examine it, but Mistress Sugden rated him for his indecent thought, so he turned his attention to Polly and gave her a hearty kiss that sent her running, her cheeks scarlet, to her friend Anne, with news of his return.

From that day Alec turned his full attention to setting up a real fishing industry for the settlement. In this he was joined by Matthew Scrivenor, released from his irksome post as deputy President. Smith had told him a good deal about Alec's abilities; he had already a fair knowledge of ships, though more of fishing. He had tried to get the settlers to finish the second pinnace before Smith's return, so now he and Alec forced on the work and set up the vessel for the express purpose of gathering food from the sea. There was standing rigging to be made and a stout mast. Sailcloth they had in the store, waiting to be shaped and stitched. Nets were scarce and among the settlers those who understood tatting scarcer still. But reels of thread, like the sailcloth, waited to be used and under the new direction workers were found willing to make nets, were taught and urged to continue under threat of punishment. Most were willing when given encouragement and a lead. They had gone short of victuals long enough to look forwards to fish on their platters, not only on Friday, but any other day of the week.

'But 'twill not keep,' Alec explained, 'except it be dried or salted down. Drying will be no' so easy in this humid air and frequent mist off the sea, so we must salt it.'

'How so?' Matthew asked. 'Our store is low. We can spare none for the purpose.'

Then we must make it; on the spur of our land against the sea,

in shallow pans of salt water, drying in the sun as they make it at home on our east coast.'

Matthew nodded. Why had no one in this settlement thought to set up this industry before? He left Alec to continue fitting out the pinnace with six men at his command while be engaged more workers with spades and rakes to find and dig a place for the salt pans.

'We must salt more than our fish,' President Smith said when they described their activities to him. 'Venison too. Some of these thieving Indians that have been creeping into the town to steal our swords have offered in exchange to teach our men to hunt the deer. They must use the bow, I have ordered. We must not give away the secrets of pistol musket or culverin. Let them return to the bow and relearn that skill our countrymen used so well in times past.'

'Master William Trent knows it all' Alec told him. 'There is no need to employ the naturals. Master Trent hath a friend, a werowance. Order Will to teach our folk how to trap for meat and furs. Let him buy turkeys, live couples, so we may breed from them. Will could persuade this small chief, if we offer enough beads and trinkets in exchange.'

'I have been told the man Trent is out of his mind,' the President objected.

'Nay,' Alec assured him. 'Changed maybe from what he was before, but not mad.'

'Oh well,' President Smith laughed. 'Sane or insane, if the fellow brings us food or means to obtain it we must employ him. Send him to me, Sandy. Tell him he will be rewarded.'

Alec did so, but Will was strangely obstinate, refusing the role the President offered him, though he promised to get the turkeys and to continue his private trapping operations without disclosing their secrets.

Alec was astonished to hear how much the man had done during the six weeks the barge was away. When they left Captain Smith, Will showed Alec a great pile of valuable skins he had taken, cured, and stored in his room at the Sugdens' house.

'What in God's name did'st use for curing?' Alec asked, wondering if the settlement's salt store had been raided by Will while he himself was ordered to make salt for his fish.

But Will smiled and shook his head.

'The werowance gave me the way of it' he said. 'Tis best we keep it so. I would not lose the respect he feels for me and all his tribe too.'

Alec paid little attention to this at the time but later he discovered from the werowance himself that Will was indeed admired and reverenced for surviving the torture he had been put to. They believed he had been helped to escape death and recover and support himself alone in the forest by foreign spirits he had brought with him from his own country. These spirits must be very strong, very cunning, to defeat the spells and charms of the wise men of the tribe that had held and tortured him. Alec agreed that Will's God was indeed the same he himself worshipped, who was all powerful and all-guiding, but he did not pursue a missionary course that was so much out of keeping with his way of life, so the werowance took it for mere boasting.

In spite of Will's refusal Captain Smith ordered hunting parties into the forest, chiefly composed of the gentlemen adventurers.

'They came here to find gold,' Matthew Scrivenor told Alec, laughing heartily. 'They find themselves set to hunt deer, not for pleasure, but of necessity.'

'They must wish they had never come, but were back on their fathers' lands, perhaps acting host to the King, who, I swear, is the most ardent hunter of deer in the two kingdoms.'

'You speak with confidence of the King's whims and ways,' said Master Scrivenor, curiously.

'Oh, aye,' Alec answered, turning away to get on with his work.

He was now engaged in building a landing stage and curing shed near to where the salt pans had been laid down. He wanted the fish to be landed where the catch would need little transportation. Also where in-shore breezes would not carry the smell of it to the town.

September came to an end and the forest trees blazed a gold and scarlet welcome to the fall of the year. The stems of the dogwood glowed crimson: the trunks of the trees were festooned with crimson creeper. The steamy heat and sea mists gave place to clearer air with a nip of frost in it early and late.

Alec, taking a regular crew with him, trawled the bay from its entrance to the mouth of the James River, while Matthew

Scrivenor took the new pinnace into the ocean and hove to with lines and baited hooks and long spears to destroy the sharks that rose to rob them of their catch.

One day early in the month the pinnace came sailing home far earlier than expected. She passed the shallop, where Alec was pulling in his nets, near enough for Matthew to yell, 'A barque not ten miles from Cape Henry, making hither!'

'A foreigner?' Alec shouted back, half hoping it might be an enemy they could repel with honour. 'A Spaniard?'

'God preserve us!' Matthew answered as they swept past, 'I trust they do not deceive us! She bears our flag at the masthead and the Company pennant at the mizzen.'

Alec nodded and yelled to his men to get in the trawl quickly, even if the net was only half filled. They returned to James Town at a fair speed, with the wind behind them filling the sail and the rowers pulling bravery.

So the settlement was prepared when *Mary and Margaret*, Captain Newport, came to anchor in the usual spot off the main landing stage. President Smith, with Master Scrivenor beside him, the Reverend Master Hunt, the physician Dr Bagnall, with the settlers of birth and rank, including Mistress Forrest, stood by the stage to welcome the captain when he came ashore. The principal artisans and husbandmen, including Alec and the other three women, were just behind. The rest of those settlers who were healthy, on their feet and eager to see new faces, dispersed themselves along the bank of the river. They were not many. As usual, a substantial number were sick, about half a dozen not expected to live.

Captain Newport came ashore with his principal ship's officers and two new councillors appointed by the Company in London, Master Richard Waldo and Master Peter Winne. Newport bore a letter to President Smith. London had accepted the situation and confirmed his election, which Newport had told them was inevitable.

Rather stiffly, for he had never felt he had gained Captain Newport's full confidence, President Smith accepted the letter, immediately announcing to the general company that a public meeting in the Town Hall would follow in an hour, when news would be exchanged and plans for the future laid down.

Smith then turned Captain Newport about and led him back to

his ship's boat where, stepping aboard, he said smoothly, 'With thy permission, sir, I would have speech with thee in the privacy of thy vessel. I have a delicate, but not unfamiliar situation here.'

He did not speak again until they were on board *Mary and Margaret* and sitting at the captain's table in his cabin.

'The situation is very like to that you found on your last arrival, Captain,' he said, while Newport, silent, resentful, but attentive, waited, 'Instead of Wingfield in restraint, I have Ratcliffe.'

'And Master Martin returned with Captain Nelson. I know that,' Newport said, rousing himself and speaking quickly. 'But I trust no unfortunate fellow lies here in your own previous position.'

'Nay,' Captain Smith said with a grim smile. 'I keep not my felons waiting for the rope.'

Captain Newport's face expressed his distaste, but he said nothing.

In exactly an hour from the first landing, the party from *Mary and Margaret* made their way to the Town Hall, where all those who had watched the arrival of the big ship were waiting.

Captain Newport made his report. He had brought with him stores of food and goods. Loud applause. Also seventy new colonists, of whom eight were foreigners, Dutchmen and Poles, skilled in the industry of house bunding and of metals. Also two women.

The last item caused a stir, a murmur and a few audible questions, greeted by coarse laughs. As Captain Newport ignored this response and President Smith ordered silence, the captain was able to proceed with his presentation to the assembly of the two new councillors. There was more applause but of a subdued nature. Masters Waldo and Winne bowed several times, looking both astonished and fearful at the rough appearance of their future companions.

President Smith then read aloud the orders sent by the Company to the colonists, setting out what was expected of them. Firstly they were to find and send home gold. Secondly they were to find and report upon a route to the Pacific Ocean. Thirdly they were to find, rescue or report the fate of, Sir Walter Raleigh's colonists. Fourthly, they were to attend the court of

Powhatan, the overlord of all the local tribes, explain the settlement of King James upon land that must now be considered to belong to England and at the same time serve Powhatan's vanity by crowning him king in his own country, capable of concluding pacts, as required, with the English king. Powhatan's man, Namontack, that Captain Newport had taken to England with him, was back in *Mary and Margaret*, therefore fully able to explain to his chief the great might and wealth of his new overlord.

The meeting subdued by the obvious difficulty, if not impossibility, of the tasks demanded of the settlement, then broke up.

Alec with his friends moved towards the door, where the former was stopped by a voice he knew.

'Hast no word for me, lad?' Captain Newport said, clapping him on the shoulder.

Alec bowed, red-faced.

'Your humble pardon, sir. I feared to set myself forward.'

'Are we then grown so formal? Thy friends at home remember thee still. See, I have letters to give thee from them, Master Francis Leslie, his kinsman the alderman, and that Danish sea captain with his neat trading barque. He was lying in the Pool the three weeks of my fitting out in yonder *Mary and Margaret*.'

'I thank ye with all my heart,' Alec said, grasping the letters.

'Away and read them!' Captain Newport told him. 'Come aboard me when you will. I would hear more news of the fishing. Master Angus Leslie told me thou'd never be long parted from the sea.'

Alec walked away with a fast beating heart, moving towards the house by habit until he drew near to it and saw Polly in the doorway waving to him. He found he was stirred by the sight of her pretty face, her greater animation than usual. He did not know it was an immediate response to the unthinking kiss he had given her. But he quickened his steps until he recollected the letters in his hand. He then waved back to her but instantly decided he could not read these precious letters in her company, nor hurt her by a churlish refusal to do so. So he pushed the long sealed scripts inside his doublet and pointing towards the site of the new landing stage, where the shallop lay, still not fully unloaded, turned off in that direction. Polly, dejected, her

new-found self-confidence all destroyed, watched him until he was out of sight.

Alec found the vessel not more than half emptied, but with four members of his crew at work upon the catch. The others, they explained, were in the smoking shed, hanging up the smaller, gutted fish over a slow fire, in the Indian manner taught them by Alec, who had it from Will Trent.

Alec worked with them while a messenger went back into the town to find more of the errant crew. In a couple of hours the work was done and Alec was able to sit down, alone, in the stem of the shallop, to open his letters and read.

Captain Olaf Henderson of *The Queen of Denmark* greeted his absent friend, rejoiced in his arrival at those distant parts and wished him further prosperity.

'Survival,' Alec corrected as he turned to the next missive.

This was from Alderman Angus Leslie, with similar thanksgiving and praise for the efforts of his 'dear boy' and a short account of the merchant's present success in trade and plans for the future. He would be pleased to consider, he said, any schemes the settlement had in hand for the export to England of precious metals and other things of value. He was a member of the Company's council in London. If Alec could establish his own worth to them he might shortly be able to set about his restoration in the eyes of the Law.

This meant an approach to a pardon, Alec thought, blessing the good merchant and remembering with a sudden warmth of feeling, his kindness in those distant first days in London.

He took up the last letter. The writing was that of Francis Leslie, his dearest friend, who had sent no message the last time. With joy and a great uplifting of his spirit he began to read.

'I have not wished before this to learn ought of thee, having for long considered thee lost and that thy death had wiped out that which lay between us. But time hath somewhat restored the balance. Katharine Ogilvy, my wife, hath given me a son and is already expecting her third child—'

Alec, having read thus far, put the letter down upon his knee, a chilling fear seized upon him and for some seconds he could not bear to continue. Her *third* child! Then the first …?

'The first, I think it will be no surprise to thee to know, is of thy begetting, though I have accepted him as my son from his

birth. None know of this except those who saw him in his first days and recognised his true likeness. Nor shall any know, unless thou wish to claim him. Indeed 'tis a strong and fearless child, much to my liking, as his father, alas, was to me till this betrayal. Do not think, Sandy, that I have left in me any thought of revenge. I think that Kate egged thee on. I know that she would not have married me but to escape her shame and give her bastard a father. She hath been a good and careful wife to me. I will not say a loving one—'

Again Alec put down the letter. Indeed, though he kept it safe, it was many days before he could bear to finish reading it. All his old guilt, his remorse, his contempt for the fleeting lust that had occasioned it, for the weakness that Katharine's exceptional beauty had found in him, all this drove now into his heart in burning actual pangs that brought him to his knees on the fishy deck of his shallop and forced from him real groans of pain and presently tears that had little in them of self-pity and much of self-contempt. Had he not frequented whores enough in the great city to satisfy his needs but he must debauch a silly girl, as loose in her morals as she was vague in her ideas of fame, but who was the idol of his love-blind friend? God had punished him for that single, never repeated act of infamy, in making it fruitful. Francis had suffered while he, in ignorance, thought and planned only his own welfare.

When he was calmer, less confused, Alec tried by prayer to make his peace with God, but found little satisfaction in the exercise. He had no wish to engage the help of the Reverend Master Hunt, a prime gossip, as all knew, though saintly. Instead he walked about the plantations and the shores of the bay until the lights in the settlement went out. Then he went silently home and silently, supperless, to bed.

Chapter Thirteen

While the new colonists took possession of vacant houses, arranged in them the articles they had brought with them, made friends with the former settlers and in many cases tried to discover how best to employ themselves, the augmented Council discussed the orders brought by Captain Newport. President Smith was enraged by the repetition of old assumptions, long proved false or else impossible to demonstrate.

There was no gold in their part of the New World; no gold ornaments, no gold utensils, made from ore dug up or washed in the rivers. Powhatan displayed no gold. He had a few ornaments of silver, but would not say where they came from.

Then, the Pacific Ocean? Smith produced his latest maps, carefully and beautifully drawn and accurate, as was later proved, to an astonishing degree, allowing for the difficulty of making any observations at all from the barge and from his short sallies upon land. It was not in their competence, he declared, to mount an expedition able to fight hunger, Indians, mountains, waterfalls, disease and wild beasts in a continuous march into the interior. No one knew where the ocean lay, in which direction or how far off. True, some tribes had spoken of great waters in the north-west, but seeing how many wide rivers flowed into this Chesapeake Bay, might not their tales relate to an even larger main stream from which all flowed, or even to a great lake? London had no conception of the distances, the size of things, in this vast unexplored territory.

The new councillors were impressed. They had already suffered some disillusionment, for they had been told of glittering prospects for any man of a sturdy, inquisitive nature. But here they found conditions worse than in any poor village at home deserted by its squire or decimated by the plague, that recurrent scourge.

It was some knowledge of the plague that guided a number of the new settlers in making their homes. Where a hut or a house had been emptied by the dread dysentery, they cleaned it thoroughly, scraped down the walls, burned the existing

furniture and any loose materials of any kind, dug over the floor and boarded it afresh with tarred wood sanded over to make a fine dry surface.

These actions promoted a campaign, long due, to improve the sanitation of the town and though many newcomers suffered from the ague and other ills as winter advanced, the killing dysentery did diminish and the number of deaths by the spring of the next year, though serious, were more than halved from those of the first settlement.

Captain Newport found the result of the Council's deliberations most unsatisfactory. He was appalled to find so little progress made in establishing the settlement on a self-providing basis. Apart from the President's two explorations with their meagre results, nothing had been accomplished, nothing really attempted. True, the chickens he had landed on his first arrival had made their natural increase, particularly those in the charge of Mistress Sugden, who understood their maintenance. The three sows had farrowed and the next pig generation would show an increasing number of productive animals as well as some for food. But the number of unskilled wastrels was as great as ever; young Master Scrivenor had not been able, in the absence of a firmer hand, to get them to make the least effort. And now here was President Smith, instead of supporting him, speaking of further exploration as undesirable, if not impossible, except for necessary food. He was driven to go about the town asking questions, describing the London Company's dissatisfaction and complaining bitterly at the lack of any really valuable cargo to take back with him.

At last William Trent agreed to produce his furs. Captain Newport was delighted. There was no point in giving money for them, he explained, but he would issue to Master Trent the equivalent in shares of the Company. He explained the system of joint-stock holding. Will was sceptical.

'Tis money of a kind, but that kind be in England, say'st?' he argued. 'Nowt of use to me an I do not return t' it and that I never shall.'

'You mean to stay here, then?'

Will looked sidelong at the captain, a strange look, part cunning, part vagueness. Newport remembered his history and a discussion of his case he had held with Namontack, the Indian,

one night at sea. So he did not press his question, but said, ‘You believe James Town will prosper, then?’

While he again waited for a reply, but not receiving any, Alec came in, listened and then said, ‘Our Will hath a certain experience. Not personal only, Captain. He showed me a stone with a date on it. Tell him, Will.’

But Master Trent was not in the mood for further conversation, so they left him.

‘You must persuade him to show me this stone,’ Captain Newport said. ‘Mayhap ‘tis the evidence we seek for the fate of Roanoke.’

‘I think that be so,’ Alec answered. ‘The only evidence unless more stones exist. There is no white settlement but ours in the whole kingdom of the Algonquin nation. That I am sure of.’

Left with his fourth order, the crowning of Powhatan, Captain Newport persuaded the President to make it a worthy occasion. He had brought with him a copper crown, some ornaments decorated with semi-precious jewels, also several articles of doubtful utility.

Captain Smith was willing enough. It was time the settlement had some kind of festival to lift their drooping hearts before the coming winter. The new settlers were a more promising lot than the last, nearly all artisans of one kind or another. Perhaps the Poles would know how to find silver and work it and the Dutch seemed to have skills in house building. Some of the Englishmen had already joined John Laydon in his glass production.

The women, too, might prove valuable or perhaps only a danger, promoting brawls. So far one of them, Joan Cook, had promised herself in marriage to a carpenter, while the other, keeping herself demurely aloof during the voyage, had now been approached by Mistress Forrest. With Anne’s marriage arranged for the early spring, the lady had need of a maid to replace her. Besides, the younger brother of Bartholomew Gosnold, Mistress Forrest’s deceased relative, had arrived in *Mary and Margaret*. She had welcomed this Anthony Gosnold with great joy and taken him into her house, but on Anne’s departure, would find it difficult to keep him without domestic help, she said.

But Rose Bartlett had not engaged herself to Mistress Forrest, nor had she refused. Meanwhile the one-roomed hut she had quietly taken over, and which was already called ‘The

Honeypot', received an unending stream of kind neighbours, bearing gifts of varying sorts, also offers to do any interior work that was needed to make the place habitable. Mistress Bartlett accepted the gifts at the door but discreetly refused the offers. Though Alec, going out to his shallop early each morning, did see a succession of figures walking away from 'The Honeypot' and smiled sourly at the upright backs and springy gait of several formerly dejected young gentlemen.

He did not compete. He had no wish to embroil himself in any further unprofitable, dangerous traffic with the other sex. Besides, Mistress Bartlett early showed her preference for rank, however unworthy the possessor in the sight of the majority. Even the unpopular George Tucker enjoyed her favours. The honest artisan was cold-shouldered where the unskilled lounger was ogled.

Mistress Sugden was highly indignant at such open shamelessness. It put her in mind of Bristol, she told Alec, which made him laugh heartily for the first time since he had his discomforting news from England.

'John is set upon building a house for him and Anne Burrows when he hath finished the cargo of glass he prepares for sending into England. They will marry in the spring, if all prospers.'

'Polly should find her a husband too, or rather ye should find one for her.'

She looked at him, compelling his attention.

'Thou knows where I would choose, Sandy, if so be he showed an inclination. Poll will never look elsewhere. Her heart is fixed.'

It grieved him to disappoint the good woman, for whom he had a deep affection as well as admiration. But he only said in a low bitter voice, 'I am not worthy the love of any honest woman,' and went out to the boats and the sea, where he spent most of his days at this time. Mistress Sugden kept this brief exchange to herself, for she did not want to add to Polly's disappointment and humiliation.

Captain Newport set about his preparations for the crowning of Powhatan, with general approval but very little initial success. The chief's fellow tribesman was sent back to his lord with full instructions but after a long delay a message was sent by another subject to the effect that Powhatan acknowledged

the intended compliment, but would not leave his capital at Weromancomoco, twenty miles or more up the James River from the settlement.

There was no arguing with the suspicious potentate. His own policies depended upon flattery, deceit and treachery. Naturally he assumed like methods from the newcomers. He welcomed any move they made towards an extended peace, for he had found them profitable and he had not yet succeeded in getting hold of their 'fire sticks' which he coveted strongly. Let them bring this object of adornment and he would entertain them regally.

Captain Newport was affronted; President Smith was amused but cautious; the Council, having little knowledge apart from Master Scrivenor, agreed with the President.

So in the end an expedition set forth in one of the pinnaces attended by a number of ship's boats, together with coracles and canoes made by the settlers. Captain Newport went with the President and the Council, the senior gentlemen among the settlers, their equivalent among the newcomers and about a dozen of the more light-hearted younger men, including Alec. They took their pistols, their swords and daggers, but no larger firearms. A few that had no new clothes since they first landed, wore their armour. But Captain Newport had brought with him a few fashionable suits of fine cloth, one for the President of dark purple velvet, with a lace collar and cuffs in the new fashion and a gold chain to hang about his neck.

'You represent His Majesty the King,' Captain Newport explained coldly, when the President demurred at putting on such finery. He had never approved of John Smith, though he had to acknowledge the man had brought order and some industry to the settlement. If only he had not such an uncomfortable mode of speech, such a wish to differ, to argue, such a capacity for harsh, even brutal behaviour, particularly to the natives, such a knack of being right in his judgments.

On this occasion Captain Smith gave in. He accepted the purple velvet costume, with its short black cloak lined with scarlet silk and its smart black hat with a scarlet upright feather at the side.

'Powhatan will have a great circlet of feathers about his brows,' Captain Smith said, laughing. 'My feather will match

only that of my little friend, the Princess Pocahontas.'

Just before they embarked the President took Alec to one side.

'They have so dressed me up I cannot wear my body armour,' he explained. 'The breeches have a quilted lining, but afford little protection from arrow or knife.'

'Are we then to expect an attack?' Alec asked, astounded.

'Nay, lad. Not from Powhatan. Or not before the ceremony, I'll swear, for he must feel a great curiosity as to its nature. 'Tis from nearer at home I must be on my guard.'

Alec nodded but said nothing.

'A certain *Rat*,' went on the President, 'doth gnaw his heart out with rage and envy that his self-considered grandeur is ignored, his mutiny still held against him. He hath one or two followers, who convey news to him in his lodging on *Mary and Margaret*.'

'Your absence—' Alec began.

'Is provided for,' Captain Smith answered. 'I simply need another pair of eyes to keep me from harm while mine are fixed upon Powhatan as I crown him.'

'My eyes and arms shall be at your service, sir,' Alec answered with a formal bow.

'Then I shall have no further fears. Come, boy.'

The procession of boats got under way with much cheerful shouting and splashing, with mariners cursing the small craft with music played on recorders magically produced from treasured stores and Indian tom-toms to beat out the rhythm. Those left behind in the settlement for it was not abandoned defenceless, watched the noisy departure, framed in the regal gold, scarlet and crimson of the autumn trees, until it passed the first bend in the river. They stayed a little longer, listening to the pipes and drums, still playing the old tunes of England, last heard by many at country fairs or similar gatherings in the fields outside London City walls.

In Weromancomoco the great Powhatan, too, had made preparation for his guests with dancing by young girls and a banquet. He could not prepare for the ceremony of crowning, since he had no idea what it meant nor how it was performed. But he arranged about himself his elders, his wise men, his principal squaws, his sons and in marked prominence his favourite daughter, Pocahontas, still spoiled, but no longer the

insistent child deliverer from death of Captain John Smith. Both her success on that occasion and her growth into early womanhood with its attendant ceremonies, had given her an added dignity and quiet determination that were impressive, since she was scarcely even now much more than thirteen years of age.

The James Town party disembarked with help from Powhatan's braves, all painted and feathered for the occasion. The President had arranged during the voyage for guards to be placed with the boats both on board and on shore. Though the procession was to carry no arms but their pistols and swords, the pinnace carried a demi-culverin, discreetly covered with its attendant gunners. Captain Newport approved of these arrangements, though he did not anticipate trouble of any kind. Captain Smith always anticipated trouble wherever he was and usually found it.

The procession formed up outside the great wigwam where Powhatan awaited them, seated and lit by several fires near to the entrance. The chief sat in semi-darkness on a raised wooden throne, robed in a great deerskin cloak with chains of pearls and beads about his neck, leather fringed and decorated trousers and a beaded leather belt in which a long hunting knife was thrust. He did not move as the procession entered, nor did his braves or the strangely garbed wise men. But he grunted an order and Namontack stepped forward to act as interpreter.

Captain Newport explained the reason for the crowning. It was to confirm the great chiefs position in these lands that had now been taken into the protection of his own lord, the great chief and king over the water, who ruled lands beside which the kingdom of Powhatan was but a tiny part.

Alec caught the President's eye at this point. John Smith, who knew most of Europe and the Middle East, found this description of the small northern island ludicrous. From what he had seen so far the New World could well be formed on a scale that would overtop the whole of Europe. However, effrontery was much to his liking, so though the eyes turned to Alec gleamed with laughter, the face remained as usual quiet, bold, resolute, the short greying beard adding strength to the already strong jaw.

When Captain Newport had finished the President stepped forward and said in a loud voice in the Algonquin language,

‘Great chief, rise and come forward to receive the crown!’

Captain Newport was now handed the copper crown on a velvet cushion, two gentlemen attendants stood on either hand and the President, in turn receiving the crown, repeated his respectful order.

There was a little delay while Powhatan examined the situation that seemed to him to bear some resemblance to an ambush. He took counsel. Namontack gave his opinion on the sincerity of the paleface delegation. He had been very suitably impressed by his whole experience of London and of the King’s court there. He advised compliance. It was a compliment, it made peace certain, and with peace came trade and gain to both sides.

Powhatan, cautiously convinced, stepped from his throne, removing his feathered circlet and came forward. But when asked to kneel, he refused. He had never knelt in his life, to any man, for any purpose; only when a boy to take aim with an arrow from his bow. Nor would he bow. But since he was considerably taller than President Smith, who could not easily reach up to put the crown on his head, he did condescend to lower it. Whereupon the two attendant gentlemen leaned a little on his shoulders so that he was forced to bend a trifle lower and the crown was securely placed while Smith said the appropriate words, the English contingent raised a cheer and the Indians stared silently, not a little awed to see their emperor with this gleaming thing on his head instead of his usual covering.

It was at this moment that Alec, fulfilling the purpose for which he stood so close to the principals, saw a stealthy movement on his right begin to change speed into a charge. His sword flashed out, he struck with the flat of it at a naked brown wrist. A knife spun in the air and fell to the ground.

Powhatan did not move. Captain Newport and the President swept round in their places, staring. Though he heard nothing Alec found his arms held to his sides and in his turn made no movement. A few feet away the would-be attacker struggled in the hands of four Indians.

President Smith strode forward, pointing at Alec.

‘That man is my bodyguard, great King Powhatan,’ he said in a loud voice. ‘Loose him! He hath saved me from the assassin’s knife!’

Alec felt his arms freed. Without turning he lifted his sword and returned it to its sheath. Smith nodded to him and stepped towards the other prisoner. He was quiet now, shivering with fear and the shock of total failure, for he had looked to escape in the hubbub he meant to cause.

'This is no Indian, though he is dressed as such!' the President roared. 'See, Powhatan, his hair is black but it curls. He hath shaved off his beard but it is strong and shows dark on his face. He hath but stained his body to match his face, bronzed by your summer sun. Give me water and I will prove it.'

But there was no need. The wretch sank to his knees, confessing it was Master Ratcliffe had devised the plot whereby President Smith would be killed and his death laid to an unknown native. He had meant to make his way back to the boats, put on his own clothes. His absence would never be detected.

Namontack translated all this to Powhatan, who had returned to his throne, impassive as usual. Not so his daughter, who ran to Captain Smith, throwing her arms about him and exclaiming that he belonged to her still, given to her by her father. To attempt his life was treason and merited death.

'Is it treason?' Powhatan asked.

'In that I am here the Representative of my king, it is treason, great chief, and merits death.'

'If he were yours to receive this death in your country, how would it be?'

'He would be hanged, drawn and quartered and the quarters set upon the piers of London Bridge or above the gates of the Tower.'

'I have seen this,' Namontack added. 'He speaks truth.'

'You would give him this death?'

'I would have him tried by a court, with twelve men, chosen at random. If they found him guilty he would be condemned to that death.'

Powhatan thought, while Pocahontas went back to him to plead her right to have the prisoner and do what she would with him. Presently he lifted his head and asked, 'How can I be sure he will be punished? If these twelve men said nay, would he not die?'

'Nay, lord. I would send him away to England, but I would

have no authority to carry out that death here.'

Powhatan rose.

'You have no authority to take him from my men. You are not here in your own land, but in mine. We will eat while we consider this matter.'

The prisoner was removed and the visitors invited to dispose themselves comfortably for the dancing and the feasting.

The entertainment was barbaric but colourful. Taken with the copious food and heady drink any nerves shaken by the unfortunate action of Ratcliffe's mutinous followers were soon quieted. The man had been identified immediately by the President, less readily by the gentlemen adventurers and not at all by Newport or any of the other settlers in the crowning party. With such a mixed company it had been easy enough for the man, one of those unsatisfactory younger sons of the landed gentry in England, to join, his body ready stained, his scant Indian garb beneath his clothes, one of the ship's boats where the other inmates did not know him.

Alec, still acting as bodyguard, considered all this as he joined in the feasting and admired the coarse beauty and lewd dancing of the girls that promised some difficulty in reassembling the settlers to return to James Town.

Pocahontas sat at President Smith's left hand, Powhatan, still wearing the copper crown on the right, Alec behind with Namontack, the interpreter. The dancing ended with an open invitation by the girls to follow them outside. Some sprang up at once to follow, others tried, but they had drunk too much, staggered about and fell. The watching Indians smiled and nudged one another but did not laugh openly. They knew of conditions in the Settlement nor were they affronted by what was merely the usual provision for an honoured guest.

But President Smith foresaw trouble if too many of his men dispersed for the night. He wanted them safely in the boats before the matter of their guilty comrade was settled in the manner be foresaw only too well. So he rose from between the father and daughter, with grave dignified words of praise and thanks for the honour done to him and his men. Powhatan returned the thanks, touching the crown which had begun to weigh on his forehead. He wanted to take it off, but decided to see the strangers go first.

‘About that troublesome fellow of mine—’ Captain Smith began, but Pocahontas, hearing the translation cried, ‘He is mine, my father! He attacked my hero, my loved one!’

Stroking her neck indulgently, Powhatan said, ‘The man is deserving of death. You agree?’

‘I agree,’ answered the President. ‘But our justice demands his trial.’

‘In your own country?’

‘In my own country and the dependencies, of which James Town is now one.’

‘But we are here in *my* country,’ said Powhatan, his cold black eyes unmovingly on Captain Smith.

‘That is so also, King Powhatan,’ Smith agreed.

There was complete understanding between them. The President wasted no time in gathering his men together and marching them back to the boats. Some of them, led by Alec, rounded up the missing. This task was nearly finished when a fresh fire began to blaze at the edge of the forest away from Powhatan’s great dwelling.

‘Get to the boats!’ Alec cried. ‘I’ll follow at once.’

He knew very well, before the screaming began, what the fire meant. The men with him knew. They stopped, horrified, an inclination to save one of their own race from these savages moved them, but a stronger inclination to avoid his fate kept them rooted. From among them George Tucker started forwards, babbling of rescue, furious, but terrified.

‘Go, fools!’ Alec shouted. ‘All of ye! Would ye have us all massacred!’

They ran, but he turned and raced in the direction of the fire and the screaming. He saw they had the would-be assassin fastened to a tree in their usual fashion. They had already hacked off the tips of his fingers which dripped blood. They were preparing their torches to burn holes in his body and their knives to flay him.

Alec’s knees shook, he could not go forward. A man rose from the ground before him. It was Namontack, who said to him in his limited English, ‘This usual custom.’ He had heard the phrase very often in England. ‘Must not try stop it.’

Alec knew what he must do. Though he felt his face and body drenched with a cold sweat he drew his pistol and forcing a grin

said, ‘I stopped the man. He is mine, too. Pocahontas, yes. But mine, too. I demand to do what I will with him.’

Namontack understood. Not the whole of it, but enough to stop the fiends at their work, to persuade them to stand back as the big red-haired foreigner came near.

The bound wretch, gasping, moaning, beyond all control, lifted his bloodshot eyes and screamed again at sight of the pistol in Alec’s hand.

‘They’ll not let ye die quick,’ Alec said. ‘’Tis all I can do for ye, traitor!’

He fired at close range, seeing the other’s eyes glaring into his, his twisted mouth spitting rage and despair.

When the man’s head fell forward Alec turned his back on the interpreter, on the groans of disgust, the whispering, the fierce sudden words of violence. He walked steadily away to the edge of the clearing and disappeared among the trees.

Chapter Fourteen

The crowning was accomplished, but the results did not promise any great improvement in the colony's relations with Powhatan or his subjects. The expedition returned to James Town in a subdued frame of mind. Even Captain Newport could not but blame Master Ratcliffe for his conspiracy. For the ex-President, though shaken by its failure, was unrepentant.

Unfortunately Captain Smith spoiled Newport's change of heart and increased his own unpopularity among the gentlemen adventurers by an act that no one could approve but himself.

Before the boats set off from Weromancdmoco at dawn following the night of revelry and terror, a messenger came from the Princess Pocahontas. He bore a leather bag which he was to deliver to Captain John Smith with these words: 'Beloved, your country, you have said, displays the heads of your traitors on the poles of your wigwams. This was your traitor, not my father's. Do with him according to your custom.' In the bag was the scalp, neatly taken, still soft and bloody, of Ratcliffe's man.

Captain Smith accepted the bag gravely, sent an appropriate message of thanks and continuing devotion to his young admirer and on arriving back at James Town, took the bag over to *Mary and Margaret* where he delivered it to Captain Ratcliffe in the presence of Captain Newport. He explained shortly how he had come by it and left before the ex-President, chalk-faced and trembling and the sea captain, red with anger, were able to speak.

Naturally the tale went through the settlement like a thunderstorm on a hot summer's day. Many were horrified to hear of the murderous plot, others to discover how and why it had failed. Alec made both friends and enemies for his part in the outcome.

'I am both famous and infamous,' he protested to Mistress Sugden. 'I sought neither, only to add to the safety of the settlement. An I were a free man I'd have a mind to go back home.'

'But seeing they have outlawed thee, thou canna,' she

answered, bluntly. ‘Yet thou hads’t letters, dids’t not? Can thy friends not move for a pardon?’

She had heard the story of the tavern death but nothing of the later killing of the warden of Eilan Donan. Nor of Kate. Never of Kate, Alec told himself. And now the fool masquerader! Out of pity for the man’s agony, but also, he told himself angrily, out of contempt for his multiple misjudgement, that had put them all at risk.

Polly, who was spinning, heard this conversation.

‘There’s many say thou dids’t bravely,’ she interrupted, stopping her work to lean towards him over her spinning wheel. ‘It were an impudent young neer-do-weel as Anne and I know well—him and his friend that slimy Tucker. God rest his soul, I’d not will him those torments the Devil puts it into these heathen souls to—’

‘Hush, lass,’ her mother said, seeing she was working herself towards hysteria in her loving admiration of Alec’s courage and her loathing of his deed of mercy.

The girl recovered herself. She sat back, quietened but still looking at Alec with sad eyes.

‘What would the poor folk here do without thee and those few like thee?’ she asked in her gentle voice.

‘Better mayhap if I were away,’ Alec answered, turning from her. ‘But never fear, Poll. Those friends at home can be friends no more, so I must walk warily and ye two must help, since patience is not in my nature, God forgive me.’

He meant what he said and for this reason managed to avoid joining President Smith’s next and subsequent expeditions away from James Town.

These excursions were not punitive, nor exploring. They were simply in search of trade, to lay up sufficient food for the winter that was nearly upon them.

Alec’s refusal was accepted by the President, who had wished to engage the tall Scot for whom he had a great liking and so wished for his company. But he decided on consideration to meet Alec’s reluctance with consent because he was by his fishing a very valuable provider by now. What Master Scrivenor and his friends did for pleasure, Alec had made into a business and a prosperous one at that. Not only did his boats and men fish the waters of the Bay and even gather sturgeon now and

then in the open sea, but having eaten Powhatan's oysters and seen the string of pearls about his neck, he consulted Will Trent and went prospecting for oyster beds on the many small islands just offshore. He was soon rewarded. Another industry was laid down, men were found who understood shellfish, had cultivated or watched others cultivate oysters near Colchester and lobsters in Lyme Bay.

Captain Newport planned to leave James Town in December of that year, taking Captain Ratcliffe, whom he had kept a close prisoner for the latter's safety since the unhappy events at the crowning of Powhatan.

There were no more attempts upon the life of President Smith, due more, perhaps, to the latter's continuous long absences in the cause of trade than to any slackening in Ratcliffe's desire and scheming for revenge, not only on his own account but on that of the young man who had found hideous death in place of the expected reward.

Captain Smith's absences, therefore, were much approved by Captain Newport, who was a fair-minded man and had to acknowledge that a good stock of food was being laid up to carry the settlement through the winter. Trade would continue, for Smith insisted upon taking corn in exchange for much trash and a little valuable steel and copper. For the most part the Indians, prompted by Powhatan, refused to part with corn they said they could not spare. Smith insisted, the Indians tried to attack, to ambush, to snare, even to poison him and his crews, but all failed. The man's energy was unlimited, his resource, his courage were unbreakable. Always his determination defeated a people who were totally unused to such a quality. In the end Powhatan left his capital rather than agree that he could by no means send these unwanted foreigners away. But he did not succeed even then in depriving them of the trade they sought for Pocahontas defied her father and Captain Smith sailed away from the deserted Weromancomoco with the corn she had preserved for him.

The President was planning still more ventures for food when Captain Newport left for home. Newport took with him as well as ex-President Ratcliffe, a good cargo of glass, tar, pitch, sassafras, cured furs, dried and salted fish, a few pearls gathered by Alec, samples of cotton and tobacco and the usual

consignment of clapboards. Also letters from several of the settlers and an account of the last year's events written in flamboyant style by John Smith.

Alec's letter to Master Angus Leslie dealt solely with business matters. He praised President Smith's administration and the present Council, especially Matthew Scrivenor. He asked that if possible no more idlers, dreamers or criminals be allowed to emigrate to James Town '… for we have our fill of them, these drones that do no work, but eat our stores. They will not hunt nor fish, dig nor plant. They lie in the sun all summer and sit by their fires all winter—'

To Francis, Alec wrote in deep sorrow and shame but very briefly, for the matter lay now well in the past and there were no means to undo his act and its result. He must express humiliating thanks for Francis's kindness to his bastard son but he saw no likelihood of ever seeing the boy. He grieved for this end to their friendship. He looked back upon it with love and abiding sorrow.

The writing of this letter, followed by the sight of *Mary and Margaret* passing away over the horizon of the great Atlantic, which many of the settlers besides Alec watched from Cape Henry, brought him to the lowest depths of depression he had yet reached since he landed on those alien shores. Master Scrivenor, seeing him so low, invited him, when they happened to berth their fishing boats at the same time, to take a meal with him.

'Then I can hear thy complaints in private,' he said, as they walked up from the hard together. 'With John Smith away again the ordering of affairs falls on me. Not that I seek it or enjoy it,' he added, with a grin that proved his sincerity'

Alec's first impulse was to refuse the invitation, but his need for friendship was great, Scrivenor was only a few years his senior, the disasters of the last three years of his life pressed upon him unbearably. He continued to walk at his companion's side until they reached the latter's house. He went in with him and before the evening was out his story was told, with all its grim detail and sad, perplexing results.

Master Scrivenor was sympathetic. His own past was far from blameless but without lasting embarrassments. He, too, had killed in anger, though in a straight fight with an equal.

‘I was not proscribed, Sandy,’ he explained. ‘I just considered it was as well not to appear for a time. So here I am. The whole business being done in secret will by now be wholly forgotten.’

‘For that ye are most fortunate, Master Scrivenor. I’ll not dare risk an appearance in England nor Scotland either, till our Jamie maybe grants me a pardon. And who, knowing the sum of what I am guilty of, will dare put my name forward?’

‘Perhaps our Captain Newport?’

‘With Master Ratcliffe swearing I did murder his young follower most horribly?’

‘The President wrote his commendation of that action. It saved the fellow from worse torture and stopped a concerted attack upon our boats when the Indian blood lust was roused enough to make them bold.’

‘The President understands these folk,’ Alec said, moodily, still nursing his unhappiness. ‘He knows they speak louder and fiercer than they intend to act. His roughness, besides, hath grown upon him over the years he was a soldier and a prisoner in Turkey and the far parts of Europe. He will not complain to sleep in the snow if need be. He will work and travel all day and fight at the end of it. But the men complain and that loudly. I think he hath many enemies. Also I share the blame for that I killed a fellow countryman, while they sought leave to rescue the wretch in a concerted action.’

‘I do not fear for you,’ Master Scrivenor said, with a short laugh. ‘There’s no man here, not on thy side, who dare lift a hand against you. I know I would myself avoid such a quarrel.’

He spoke in jest, but kindly and though Alec’s face stiffened he merely said, ‘We have no possible cause of dispute, Master Scrivenor.’

‘Nay, Sandy, not so formal. We take too much pains here, where our lives give little excuse for it to preserve position and rank, as we might at home. Thou art Sandy Nimmo to all here, so I must be Mat Scrivenor, to thee at least, from now on.’

This friendly speech won Alec over far better than any argument. Mat who had procured some very potent liquor from the Indians, filled Alec’s beaker for a series of toasts to their friendship, the settlement, the confounding of Powhatan, the return of Captain Newport, the health of the President. And before they parted in a very maudlin state, they toasted

themselves again and their future prospering.

Next morning Alec suffered the usual discomforts of his night's drunkenness, but from that time he looked upon Mat Scrivenor as a friend and became reconciled to his future. Not simply with a wish to survive the continuing hardships of his outlandish life, but with a true resolve to make the colony expand, become a thriving offshoot of his homeland, independent, prosperous, free from the corruption, power and cruelty that together with his undoubted recklessness had engineered his downfall.

These conclusions, this determination, did not come to him all at once, nor even very consciously at any time. They developed as he sailed about the wide bay, raking fish from icy waters, landing it on a snow-covered stage, laying it up, gutted and pressed between layers of ice, for immediate use. Later, as the winter grew less severe, he had it salted down in the way he had devised the summer before and had now perfected.

Mat Scrivenor continually rallied him for his over-seriousness, his overbearing Scots temper, he called it, meaning not so much his sudden rages as those dour, close-lipped silences that he put down to pride.

'I talk when I've ought to say,' Alec answered him, smiling, for he could not take offence at such open-hearted teasing. 'Hast never considered I am the only Scot among ye all? To us the English are all foreigners, and we to them.' He added, with a short laugh, 'Many of us just such devilish barbarians as these red-skins here.'

Mat demanded to know the meaning of these words, so one evening before the fire in his friend's house Alec told him about the West Highlands, the chiefs of the septs and their overlords, the raids, the feuds, the slaughter of the innocent farming peasantry.

'Not so different from our werowances and their great chief Powhatan and those other parcels of tribes that are his enemies lying in the country beyond the mountains and the waterfalls.'

'Thou has suffered indeed, my poor Sandy,' Mat said, all his cheerful joking manner subdued by real feeling for his friend.

But he could not be solemn for very long.

'This lies all behind thee now,' he insisted. 'Now we must put our minds, the Council certainly, the President if he be returned,

to this happy event we have corning to the settlement. Know you not Anne Burrows is to be wed to her John two weeks from now, and Joan Cook joins them at the altar with Tom Meadows.'

Alec laughed.

'Dost think our Poll and her mother would leave me ignorant of such a great event? It means more to them than any other of the dangers of this place, of the world entire, I think.'

'Is it so great a danger?'

Reminded of what he had told Mat in his evening of indiscretion Alec said gravely, 'We have but one physician and no midwife, though Mistress Sugden hath the knowledge, I believe of animals.'

'Are we not all animals under God? Women especially. But in His protection to hasten or delay our end according to His will?'

Alec was silent until Mat said, with his usual lightning change of mood, 'Now why not make this a triple coupling? Polly Sugden would make thee an admirable wife and her mother would give a ready consent. She trusts her pretty daughter, but since our Rose is come among us with her airs and graces and her foibles and that hard bright eye for her own well-being, the men feel their deprivation far more keenly than they did before. We cease to be a conquering army on the march but dwindle into a peaceful homestead. So look for home comforts.'

'I have a great affection for the Sugdens, all three,' Alec said stubbornly. 'But I can never marry Poll.'

Mat looked at him thoughtfully.

'Thy heart is still in that cold and distant land of thine,' he said. Still fixed upon that early love.'

'I never loved Kate,' Alec said, mistaking what his friend had said, for he did not remember that in his cups he had babbled of Janet Macllroy and his boyhood's passion for her.

The double wedding was a great occasion. Everyone in the settlement attended except a few poor invalids and a small number of Ratcliffe's disappointed men who still could not forego their aspirations nor control their envy of the present Council of young men, led, when he happened to be in James Town, by their arch enemy, President John Smith.

The President was there in person, to give away the two brides in the absence of their fathers. The Reverend Master Hunt performed the ceremony with rings provided by Mistress Forrest

for her maid and by Captain Newport for Joan Cook. Before he sailed for home he had deposited a small store of such rings with the clergyman in anticipation of happy events, for he was quite determined to bring out more women to the settlement. He decided, quite rightly, that women were needed there as well as all other domestic animals, both for increase, for recreation and for a civilising and work-compelling influence such as Mistress Sugden and Mistress Forrest exercised.

On the great day the single church bell rang for an hour before the ceremonies began. The church was filled. Everyone made what effort they could to dress in their best, if they had any or could beg, borrow or steal some.

Anne wore a taffeta rose-pink gown, given to her by Mistress Forrest. It was somewhat faded by the Virginian sun and rather cold for the season, but she covered her neck and arms with a woollen shawl belonging to Mistress Sugden, made from the bleached wool of her former Yorkshire sheep.

Joan Cook, having but recently travelled from England with the object of making a home for herself in the New World, had brought a suitably modest, blue woollen skirt and an embroidered linen bodice with a close short ruff in the old fashion of Elizabeth's reign. Both the young women had devised farthingales, made from bunched, dried reeds, to wear under their petticoats, which added to their dignity though not to their comfort, for they were not accustomed to such hampering garments and soon took them off when the church service was over and the feasting began. ?

The Council were wise enough to provide a hunger-filling meal in the Town Hall at long trestle tables to which the populace had brought their own benches and stools. There was fish, both smoked and fresh, venison roast and broiled, and turkeys, supplied by some Indians of the Pamunkey tribe who were invited to the wedding as a reward.

Music was played during the feast by those who had disclosed their skill at the crowning of Powhatan. It was soon demanded again for dancing, when the tables were cleared away and the remaining scraps of food, where they had not been pilfered, were taken to the sick in their huts.

President Smith, as always on the lookout for what he called 'garboils', gave the usual speeches of congratulation and good

wishes and then saw to it that the two happy couples slipped quietly away to their homes before any of the horseplay could begin that usually attended weddings at home. There was such a disparity of numbers between the bridal pairs and their well-wishers as they might well suffer injury instead of happiness.

'There be some I have noticed would tear the roofs from over their heads in envy and lewd rage,' Captain Smith remarked to Alec who was standing near the door of the Town Hall with Mat. 'Even so sturdy and well-built a roof as those traitorous Dutchmen put on for John Laydon before they took their skills to Powhatan, God rot them!'

He was still fuming over this latest treachery. The great chief had sent for the Dutchmen to build him a house in the European style and they had, through fear or greed or some complicated plot, given their allegiance to the overlord. They had even, by lies and cunning, persuaded Councillor Peter Winne, a gentle, honest soul to supply them with fresh arms which they sent for to use in their own defence, but turned over to Powhatan.

Alec and Mat agreed with the President. They even followed, when the Hall was cleared, to act as bodyguard to the latter until he was safe in his dwelling. Then they roamed from group to group to join in the songs and dancing and general jollity with a watchful eye for trouble.

Alec danced a formal measure with Mistress Forrest, but Mistress Sugden excused herself on the grounds that she was far too old for country sets and did not know the grand dance. But Polly was delighted to have Alec as partner and only sad that he took her out once only and then went about his former business of patrol.

There were others he and Mat met going about the same errand, appointed by Captain Smith, so after a time the two friends stood together, ready to part but reluctant to bring to an end an afternoon and evening of such unusual, simple, warm-hearted pleasure.

'Mistress Rose was not in church,' said Alec, following this thought further.

'There is a truce between her and the parson. They keep each to his own territory and never speak, nor of one another to others. Each knowing the other to be a necessary member of our community.'

Alec laughed.

'I would my father could hear these profanities!' he cried. 'He would call upon the Devil to take away his own and upon God to send a thunderbolt if the Devil delayed too long.'

'A Scot of the old persuasion, thy father!' laughed Mat. 'I'll go to the Devil and my mistress, Rose.'

Alec answered, 'And I'll to my mistress, *Shallop Pearl*, where she lies quiet on the water, awaiting me.'

Chapter Fifteen

One evening in March of that year, just before sundown, when the curling blue smoke from the chimneys began to fade into the darkening sky and candlelight to show in the windows of the houses, Will Trent came home with a bunch of foot-long corpses, dangling by their long naked tails from each hand.

Polly screamed. Mrs Sugden cried indignantly, 'Rats! What ails thee. Will, to bring vermin into my kitchen! Out wi' thee and burry them or burn.'

'Rats,' said Will, standing just inside the door and staring at Alec, who was mending nets at the other side of the room. 'Rats be not native to this land. Know you that, Sandy?'

Alec dragged his mind back from his plans for the morrow's fishing.

'Not native?' He put his nets aside and strode across to Will. 'Where got ye these?'

'Snared,' answered Will. 'In the runs I have found that go underground all about the town.'

'We have none in this house!' Mistress Sugden protested, but the men disregarded her.

'Not native, say ye,' Alec went on. 'Then off the ships?'

'They multiply fast,' Will said indifferently, letting the limp bodies fall to the ground. 'As you'd expect with all this wealth of corn our busy President exacts from most unwilling hands.'

'Good God!' Alec cried. The stores! Doth no one mind these great stores we have drawn upon through all the long winter?'

'Ask that of thy friends the Councillors,' Will told him sourly.

But he obeyed his sister's repeated order to remove the vermin. In fact he took them to his friend Opecancanough, werowance of the Pamunkeys, where they were accepted as a delicacy. Will spent much of his time now with this chief, sharing his anger and humiliation at the way Captain Smith had treated him. It was out of malice that Will had shown Alec this fresh enemy in the settlement.

An enemy indeed, who had betrayed himself to the Council at about the time Alec had been alerted by Will Trent. President

Smith, in ordering a fresh arrangement of the casks of corn so as to re-assess the daily ration, had found, to his horror, that a substantial amount had become wetted by melting snow falling on the casks and had gone rotten, while other casks had been gnawed through, scattered and eaten by rats.

The loss was considerable. The ration, instead of being increased, had to be restricted. Once more the idleness and incompetence of the many had mastery over the exertions of the few. It was useless for Captain Smith to rage against the keepers of the storehouse who had failed to prevent rain and snow from getting in. All he could do was to put the settlement on short commons and plan fresh expeditions for trade that he knew already would be fruitless.

But at this juncture, as twice before, succour came sailing into the James River, not this time under Captain Christopher Newport, their old friend, but with Captain Samuel Argall upon his first visit to the struggling settlement.

He was young, he was energetic and sanguine. He brought stores of all kinds, which he distributed; even some luxuries among them, such as wine and spices.

More important than all this, he brought news of various kinds. In the first place he had come, he told the Council, by a new route, keeping only a little to the south of west after leaving the English Channel, so that he passed near the islands of the Azores and found the north-east trades to push him past Bermuda and so to the Virginian coast. It made a passage of little more than five weeks instead of Newport's long voyages round by the Canaries, the Cape Verdes and the West Indies.

This was excellent news to the Council, for it meant a closer communication than before with the mother country, a more frequent exchange of news and of persons, a livelier trade. There were many in the settlement who would have chosen to return if they could do so without fear of punishment or persecution by the Law or by their family connections.

In addition to this Captain Argall brought news of a great assembling of ships in Falmouth, due to leave there in June with several hundred new settlers, men and women, domestic animals, farm implements; the men skilled in various trades and above all, in *Sea Venture*, a Governor for the colony appointed in London.

‘To solve all our quarrels and envy and various ambitions,’ Mat Scrivenor told Alec. ‘Poor gentleman, he little knows what awaits him!’

‘To dispose of our valiant John Smith, I’ll be bound,’ said Alec sadly, ‘who hath striven as ten men and endured hardship no ten men would easily suffer and still live.’

‘His day here is over,’ Mat said, soberly.

Alec was alarmed.

‘Whisht, man, ye speak rashly! There be those—’

‘Aye, there be many. We need no longer heed them. Governor Gates, when he arrives with his ten ships and his several hundred souls, will smother our little close, unfriendly, unskilled, unfortunate community in a suffocating embrace.’

‘You speak with too much bitterness, Mat! What hath Captain Argall said to bring up this excess of bile?’

So Master Scrivenor described to the best of his recollection the new patent that had been devised and presented to the London Company, henceforth to be named Virginia Company. It offered shares of stock at twelve pounds ten shillings each. It offered to planters and settlers a good house, food and all reasonable amenities in return for several years service to the Company at its settlement in James Town. Sir Thomas Smith in London remained at the head of the Company as its sole owner and director. A governor was to be appointed in London. He would supersede the present arrangement of Council and President.

‘I shall not personally regret it,’ Mat said, ‘for it is a great burden with little reward and no thanks at all. Moreover our President’s term will end this autumn and to my thinking, as I said, his usefulness here hath come to an end.’

But Alec shook his head sadly.

‘How ignorant they be at home,’ he said. ‘How little they conceive of our life here. And yet it is no worse than much I saw in the English countryside and those Scottish Highlands for the most part of my outlawry.’

‘City burghers and fine gentlemen,’ Mat scoffed. ‘What do they know of their native countryside? So how imagine this immensity of wildness? We have freedom, have we not? To speak ill of them without fear or favour? That is what it will be our privilege to make plain to Master Governor Gates.’

‘Not I,’ Alec laughed. ‘I’ll no join ye to beat my brains out on that wall. I’ll keep to my boats where the issue is between me and salt water. I know my place among the waves, and my smallness there.’

Matthew Scrivenor pressed his friend’s arm and left him. He was, on the whole, well pleased with Captain Argall’s account of movements in England. He did not share Alec’s affection for the President. The old mercenary, with his stories of the Turks, the middle Europeans, the battles, betrayals, imprisonments and escapes of his early life, aroused little admiration in Mat’s sophisticated mind. He hoped to find a more cultivated circle from among the several hundred companions of the large-scale expedition Captain Argall described. Sandy Nimmo was a godsend, indeed, his present fellow-councillors were pleasant enough, but if he were really to make his home in this place—Master Gates, surely already by now on his way by the new route, would make a decision easy.

No decision was required of him. He stayed, but not of his own choosing. He stayed, together with Councillor Waldo, Anthony Gosnold and several fishermen. But half of them stayed below ground in the ever-expanding cemetery and the rest below the waters of Chesapeake Bay.

Alec had gone down to the boats as usual that morning but had decided the weather was not proper for his purpose. He had noticed that Master Scrivener’s boat was not at her usual place, but had concluded he had taken her round to the main landing stage for better shelter. It was not until evening that he heard the boat with the ten men in it had gone out and had not returned.

Mistress Forrest had come inquiring to Mistress Sugden.

‘My Anthony hath not come in for his supper,’ she said. ‘He was to go fishing with Mat, so, he told me.’

‘*Fishing!’*

Alec jumped up in alarm.

‘This hath been no day for fishing, madam,’ he said, speaking quickly, ‘When did they leave?’

It must have been early, he thought, remembering when he had decided himself to call off any work on the water that day and had noticed then that Mat’s vessel was not at her usual berth.

‘Full early,’ Mistress Forrest told him vaguely. ‘To go to that island where you found pearls. Master Nimmo.’

He thanked her but was gone, running, as soon as he learned his friend’s intention. One of that group of small islands where oysters flourished off warm, shallow, shingly beaches. Pray heaven they were taking shelter there, to return when the squalls ceased as they most likely would by morning or at any time if the wind shifted.

Alec had built himself a small sturdy boat similar to the one he had made with old Nial at Eilan Donan. It had a short mast and single sail and sweeps to use if the wind did not serve. Without thought of his own safety but with a terrible dread in his heart he unloosed his little craft and pushed out into the still choppy waters of the bay. With evening the wind had certainly dropped, but the low sun shone strange and yellow on great darkening clouds and the breeze was cool for early July.

However, with his sail tied well down Alec made rapid if wet progress towards the group of little islands where he hoped to find his friends. Without his inward fear he would have rejoiced in this swift skimming from wave to breaking wave, his small sail taut in the wind, the strong hull carving the water, throwing it back, taking each thump, each pounding, with only the slightest shudder. Alec was wet to the skin with spray, but he took in no green water, the tiller was light under his hand as his boat sped on its way with the wind just forward of the beam.

When he arrived at the islands he put his boat in the lee of one of them and lowering his sail began to use the oars to move slowly along the beaches, calling at intervals, searching each small cove and creek for signs of those he sought.

He found nothing. No boat rocked at anchor or was drawn up on land: no voice answered his. In James Town it had been growing dark in the shadow of the forest. Out here it had been lighter. But now the sun went down and in that land of short twilight it soon became dark. There was no moon and the stars were covered by the heavy clouds he had seen earlier. It would not be easy to find his way back, he thought and considered for a few minutes whether it would not be wise to stay for the night on one of these islands.

Prudent perhaps, but not what he had set out to do, which was to find Mat and his friends. Had they reached the mainland

at some other spot? It was possible. But if so, where? Not north of James Town for that would have been in the teeth of the wind from where the squalls had rushed across the bay at intervals all that day. If they had run before them, then might they have been blown across the mouth of the James River, landing some twenty miles nearer to the open sea?

He decided that there was nothing at all he could do to discover this. He had established they were not at the oyster beds. He must go back and wait for news and he knew from long experience exactly what that meant in fear, frustration and misery. It seemed to him, driving back towards the mainland, the wind now on his quarter, that much of his life had been spent in this way. His childhood in the East Neuk of Fife, with his father's boats always at peril, had hardened him to loss at sea, but never completely to this waiting for news that might never come, might never be resolved but sink slowly into hopelessness, accepted grief or unbearable despair.

The darkness grew deeper and the wind rose again. Alec, staring ahead, without any real means of navigation but the direction of the wind on his right cheek and the back of his neck, began for the first time to consider his own safety. James Town was at all times too ill-lighted to show until he was within a cable's length or two of the shore. But he would have expected a beacon to have been lit by now on the shore facing into the bay. The folk knew that a fishing boat with two councillors and others on board was missing. They might have discovered by now that he was absent himself with his personal small craft.

Two councillors! Of course, the two most effective, the two capable of demanding action. President Smith had gone off again in search of food to replace the lost stores. Captain Samuel Argall was no doubt on board his own vessel and ignorant of the crisis. Peter Winne, gentle soul, was perhaps still ignorant as well. Alec groaned aloud and as he did so felt his bows strike an obstacle, sheer off, strike again and plunge on.

Instantly he threw the tiller over to gybe round and stop the boat in her course. He could see very little, but his eyes were by now well accustomed to the night, the increasing wind had blown the heavier clouds away and the July sky, never totally dark even as far south as this, showed him the wave-tops gleaming with faint phosphorescence and among them darker

objects now bearing down upon him as he lay, hove-to in their midst.

Lashing his tiller and letting the sheet run free, he lay down amidships and reached over to catch what he could. A spar, a piece of sailcloth wrapped round, shot past on a wave. Alec caught it, lost the spar but dragged the sail in. A broken floorboard bounced against the side of the boat. Alec dragged it in, too.

For an hour he worked at this salvage, wondering all the time where it had come from, but knowing full well that these sorry fragments did not belong to a native vessel, nor to one lost long ago, but to a recent disaster that could only relate to Mat and those others with him.

At last the wreckage parted from him and he found himself alone on the water with the bottom of his boat full of fragments, still far from land, still uncertain of his course to harbour, though he knew now from the direction of his drift in relation to the wind and his knowledge of the tides, that he must all the time be drawing nearer to the mainland.

As if to answer his perplexity the beacon he had longed for suddenly shot its flames into the sky, distant he guessed about three miles from where he lay. At last something would be done to help the missing ones, of whom he now counted himself one. Perhaps too late for those who mattered most. Too late. Too late.

He scrambled back to the tiller, unlashed it, gathered in the slack of the sheet and swung his boat round. It was overweighted, dipped and shuddered. He forced the tiller again, a wave smacked the stern, it swung too far, gybed again, there was a rending sound and the mast cracked across a foot above its base falling outboard and carrying with it the sail, the rigging and Alec, still gripping the sheet as he had been preparing to set course for the beacon.

In a flurry of water, spray, torn canvas, loose rope and sliding precious salvage, Alec hauled himself back to the boat's side. She was lying broached to, listing horribly, the water lapping in with every wave that swept across her, but still floating. Holding on to the side with one hand Alec managed to free his knife with the other and hack away the remaining rope that held the broken mast and sail. Once freed of this encumbrance, that was

instantly borne away into the night, he was able to heave himself inboard again, where he lay among the remains of his salvaged wreckage recovering his breath and wondering how to reach land.

First he must rid the little craft of the water she had taken in. His usual vessel for baling was somewhere below the mess. It took him what seemed an age to find it, but in the search he was able to bring some sort of order to his strange cargo. It was easier to move under water than above, so he was able to float it about. Without the broken mast and its gear he was taking in no green water now, only spray, so the boat rode more easily. When at last he was able to bale he got her on to an almost even keel. His next search found the sweeps miraculously undamaged. He had the means to drive himself to the shore, he had the direction clear, for the beacon was glowing more fiercely than ever, though it seemed no nearer.

He had but one thought now; to reach James Town with the remains of what he had found. In his toil since his own disaster he had become sure of its nature. It could mean none other than the wreck of Mat's craft and unless they had by some means, by swimming or clinging to spars, reached land, the men in her must be lost.

He felt no sorrow at this time. His grief was swamped by rage at men's helplessness before this great impersonal force, the sheer dread weight of water driven by wind, the senseless killing strength of the elements.

Senseless? Alec prayed to God as he rowed, asking forgiveness for such blasphemy, forgiveness for all his sins; asking for mercy that he might forego the further just punishment he feared would be meted out to him. As he struggled against the tide that was now threatening to sweep him past the settlement into the estuary and even on out to sea, his strength, great as it was, began to ebb, his strokes to become feebler, even his will to survive grew weak. He held his own but made a very slow progress. The sky was beginning to lighten in the east and the line of the coast to grow dark against the sky when he heard a shrill cry behind him.

'Sandy! Sandy! To thy left hand! To thy left!'

He realised then that the waves had flattened, that his weary strokes were driving the laden boat more swiftly. But he dared

not pause in his rowing, which had become quite mechanical for he knew if he did so he would collapse over his oars and fail to begin again.

The voice guided him, a high voice, vaguely familiar. Some boy, but his wandering mind could not place any young boy apart from the Indians. His surroundings were growing familiar, too, the shores of the creek, growing nearer as it narrowed, until his oars touched, and as he lifted them and the boat ran on to the sand he found a small hand closing over his, checking his movement, while Polly Sugden heaved at the boat while she cried out again and again, 'God be thanked! Oh God be thanked! Thou'rt safe, Sandy. Safe! And we thought thee lost, as well.'

He could not remember later how between them they dragged the boat and its burden above the tide mark. Polly had fastened her skirts high to wade out to him as he was drifting, hardly able to pull, past the mouth of the creek. She had run there from the beacon fire, when those who tended it had given up the work. Dawn was near, they said. They could see nothing on the water and the Indians had already brought news of bodies discovered on the shores beyond the settlement.

As Polly already knew, they saw nothing because they looked in the wrong place, out into the bay. Alec was at that time farther to the north of them and close in to land. She had gone down to the shore alone, frantic with fear and careless of anything but the need to find him. He had left as she knew on the evening before to find his friends. She never had the least misgiving that he would return to report utter failure. But as the hours passed she began to fear that his life, too, might be in danger.

So when she saw from the beach the state he was in, his hair and beard dark with salt water, his face grey with exhaustion, his clothing soaked, his boat a shambles, she was torn between thankfulness and pity. At that moment her romantic girlish dreams fell from her, never to return. This was not only her hero, he was her man. Struggling to guide him in, to help him haul the boat higher up the beach, she discovered the sturdy Yorkshire countrywoman's strength she had never before fully used. When Alec, before that, rising stiffly from the thwart where he had sat for those four gruelling hours, dropped the oars he still grasped in fingers too cold and stiff to loose them

and fell full length from the boat to the sand, she managed to persuade him to rise, she took the oars to safety first, then with him hauled at the boat and not until it was safe let him sink down again on the dry sand above the tide. She pulled off his wet jacket and shirt and wrapped him in her cloak that she had thrown down when she went into the water to turn the bows of the boat to land.

She dared not leave him to get more help, but she tended him until he recovered partially from his first stupor of exhaustion. He was then restless and confused, babbling about his childhood's home in Pittenweem and St Andrews and a girl called Janet. During this time he clung to her hand and would not free her.

At last he fell into a heavy sleep and she herself dozed, though cramped by her position, supporting his heavy head and shoulders against her and unable to release her hand from his grip.

Mistress Sugden with John Laydon and an unwilling William Trent found them at mid-morning. Alec woke then, weak but fully alert. He understood at once where he was and how he came there. He was ashamed to be found thus, declared he had suffered a slight return of the ague that attacked them all after great exertion or exposure, but asked immediately if they had news of Master Scrivenor and his companions. When they told him, with much painful hesitation that several Indians had arrived in James Town before dawn to report finding the bodies of white men on the shore to the north of the settlement Alec nodded, staring down the waters of the creek.

'Washed from the middle of the bay by the in-flowing tide,' he said slowly. 'As I feared. As I feared from the start.'

He seemed to want to get up, but suddenly he turned again, crying out, 'So I have now no friend but thee, Poll!' He laid his drawn, beaten face against her breast and broke into hard weeping.

Chapter Sixteen

The bodies of the two councillors and four of the fishermen were brought in and laid in the church while coffins were quickly made for them. Young Gosnold and the other three of the boat's crew were never found.

Nor was the true cause of the disaster. Though he was not a professional seaman Master Scrivenor was competent enough, Alec maintained at the inquest called for by Councillor Winne. The squalls had been severe; there had been considerable risk in going out at all. This could have accounted for the accident, but Alec felt bound to put other matters before the company assembled. Though he had lost the most part of the wreckage he had salvaged from the waves and brought ashore, the nature of the objects remaining suggested a calamity not unlike that he had himself suffered. Matthew Scrivenor's craft had probably also been dismasted, causing some aboard her to be thrown out at once and lost and the rest left to struggle with the foundering, perhaps capsizing hull, until they too were washed away. If this was the true story, why had the mast broken? Perhaps for the same reason his own had cracked and snapped off.

'That being …?' asked Councillor Winne.

'By deliberate intent,' Alec said boldly. 'If it please you to look at the stump, sir, it is clearly half sawn and half splintered. There be those who plot and plan and would gladly rid—'

'Enough,' Master Winne ordered, frowning. 'We are gathered here to inquire into the death of these unfortunates, not to put forward dangerous surmises. Also this relates to thine own misfortune, Master Nimmo.'

'The like may have drowned my friend,' said Alec, his face whitening as anger seized him, his blue eyes sharp with rage.

'Can we prove it?' Master Winne asked, more kindly. 'The damage to your boat, maybe. But theirs? It is all conjecture there. We have no proof. Even thy belief in a dismasting is not proved, nor can be. As for deliberate wrecking—'

He left the rest unsaid and the various murmurs of agreement and growls of approval from his hearers convinced Alec that

nothing more would be done to discover the true cause of the disaster.

All the same an account of what he had said went round the settlement, being taken in various ways. It was true that Alec had enemies, especially George Tucker, who had resented Alec's prominence from the day of his arrival. There were, too, followers of Captain Ratcliffe who had suffered by the latter's eclipse, who were haters of Captain Smith, resenting the old soldier's promotion, his constant plans to make them work, his new plantation where he forced them to dig and sow, to hoe and tend crops that they would presently be expected to harvest for the next winter. All this despite the expected arrival, the imminent arrival, of that great new fleet of fresh settlers with all the replenishment it would mean and with an appointed governor to displace the tyrant, whose term as President of the Council was nearly over.

Those who liked and admired Alec for his energy and courage were willing enough to inspect his little boat and confirm that the damage to her mast, the cause of its breaking off, was partly man-made. Some evilly-disposed person had indeed sawn it to weaken it and covered the mark of the cut with a smear of the tar Alec had used as a coating. It was a deliberate attack upon his safety.

By whom? Perhaps an Indian, some suggested. This was possible, because by now many tools, supposed to be forbidden in trade, had been exchanged for food during the last winter months. None chose to name a suspect. The community was too small. All shrank from starting a real blood feud, particularly with Alec Nimmo, who being a Scot was supposed to be particularly prone to that form of perpetual quarrel. Certainly gentle Master Winne, who kept himself informed about Alec's movements, had no desire to see the settlement break into warring factions. The thought of such an outcome filled him with horror. The drowning was bad enough.

So the matter was allowed to rest; the usual apathy sank it deep into the monotonous past and the settlement forgot mere had been a mystery, a taint of positive human wickedness. They remembered only a disaster made notable by the victims of it. God's purpose must, as always, have directed the elements to strike, just as it struck humbled mortals with death from disease

or from the enmity of the natives. Death was so frequent, so usual a visitor in James Town.

But Alec continued to grieve and in his desolation continued to seek Polly's company. He had learned from Mistress Forrest that the beacon had been lighted at Polly's insistence. She had refused to go to bed but had visited the Laydon's house and forced John, with Anne's support, to rouse up enough helpers to collect fuel and build a pile of it on the shore near the fishing boats' harbour. When the men wanted to leave it for their beds, she scolded them in so furious, so passionate a manner, they had to obey her.

Alec was both deeply touched and very grateful for this proof of her devotion. Since his business lay with the sea and fishing and boats, his fresh interest in her, born of this knowledge and in memory of her gentle care after his exhausted, grief-stricken landing, led him to engage her continued interest in his work. It was Polly who shaped and sewed the canvas for a new sail, pushing the great needle with a leather protecting her palm, dragging the greased thread taut with fingers that burned and were often cut by it. He taught her to splice ropes, to whip their ends, to bind reeds into fenders to keep the fishing boats from chafing as they lay alongside the landing stage near the salting and smoking sheds.

As a reward he sometimes took her for a short sail on a sunny evening, when a light breeze from the sea cooled the land that had lain burning in the summer heat under a white-hot cloudless sky. When the wind failed Alec would drop the sail and taking the oars turn the little boat and row back to the settlement with Polly holding the tiller under his direction.

She had never known such happiness. Nor such health. Naturally strong and used to hard work about the house and in the dairy, even serving behind the bar at the Cow and Calf, she had fretted at her comparative idleness in James Town. Her mother's fears for her safety, redoubled since the attack by the Paspaheghs, had restricted her exercise and almost begun to undermine her health. But this was all changed; she was out more than she was in.

Mistress Forrest saw it all with alarm. She spoke severely to her friend.

'I wonder at thee, Meg,' she said one morning. 'Where before

thou keps't Poll so mewed up her winter pallor was as striking as any great lady with her face lead-coated, now she is as brown as one of our men or as those saucy squaws that come into the town to steal.'

'She goes with none but our Sandy,' Mistress Sugden answered with a laugh. 'I give thanks to Our Lord nightly that he notices her at long last. For she hath loved him dearly since the very morning he came walking over the dale to offer the work of his hands for his bread.'

'Aye, she is useful to him about the boats,' Mistress Forrest protested. 'But there's nought else in it. And tongues wag for that is never woman's work and maybe shame for her at the end of it.'

'I'll trust yon lad till he betrays us,' Meg Sugden answered calmly. 'He may still look on her as some kind of sister, but 'tis not in nature his manhood willna get the better of him in t' finish. There's more than one of they fishermen speaks to her, she tells me. Happen Sandy'll come to his senses when she lets him know of that.'

'You have advised her in this?' asked Mistress Forrest stiffly.

'Nay, madam, I'm no bawd!' her friend cried, quite shocked at such a suggestion. Then she sighed. 'The good Lord will decide it. I would I had as much patience as my Poll. When she longs for any particular thing, then is she most quiet and most obstinate. So I continue to hope.'

'And I will watch most anxiously,' Mistress Forrest said as she left her.

Polly was aware of her mother's impatient hopes but she had no intention of using guile or subterfuge in the conquest of Alec. She now looked upon it as certain, but not to be hurried on. Her one anxiety lay in Captain Argall's news of the great company, now daily expected, but a good deal overdue. If many women were included among the new settlers there might be a fresh face as lovely as his Katharine of ill fame or his Janet of boyhood memory.

For Alec, during those peaceful sails on summer evenings, had opened his overcharged heart to the girl who had saved him from the sea and from his despair. She had listened quietly, asking an infrequent question to show she was listening with understanding, but otherwise subduing her envy of Kate's beauty

and Janet's still potent image of first love.

It was not until August that four ships of the expected fleet arrived. Sir Thomas Gates in *Sea Venture* was not one of them.

They brought a tale of shipwreck and disaster that drove the little colony into fresh depths of despair and misery. Using the new route discovered by Captain Argall, the ten ships had made rapid progress, until near the Bermuda islands a hurricane overcame them, scattering the fleet, driving them apart, blowing them, wrecked, upon reefs of the islands. These four had mended their damage, managed to get to sea again and had now arrived, having lost some of their complement of settlers, both men and women, a large proportion of the farm animals they carried and a good part of their stores, some of the latter spoiled, some consumed during the extended voyage.

In ten days' time two more of the missing ships arrived in like condition to the first four. And still there was no sign of *Sea Venture* with the newly appointed Governor. Worse still these latest arrivals included Captain Ratcliffe, Master Martin and Gabriel Archer, those trouble-makers who had so nearly destroyed the settlement the year before with their intrigues and dangerous plots.

President Smith was disgusted and profoundly discouraged. He gathered about him those loyal followers who still remained and explained his views. He was the sole councillor left in James Town now, for the gentle Master Peter Winne had died of a fever not long after the accident that carried off Scrivenor and Waldo.

These wicked men have not lost their ambition,' Captain Smith told his friends. 'Also they seek revenge for their former failures and humiliations. They have no position here now, but they will look to receive it when Governor Gates arrives, if ever he doth and is not lost at sea, as we must fear. Therefore we must avoid all kinds of quarrel, forbear to answer any provocation they may make. We must continue those works I have begun this summer for our support in the coming winter.'

'Surely we must seek out all new craftsmen and such as will promote our welfare,' Alec suggested. 'Already we have nigh on five hundred fresh souls. Among them surely—'

'This is true,' said John Laydon. 'I have been approached by several glaziers and engaged their services. We shall no doubt be

building fresh houses for this multitude, which I look to supply with windows and still have glass to export to England.'

Others claimed already to have met husbandmen, herdsmen and farm labourers who were eager to develop the plantations, now some thirty to forty acres, that Captain Smith had ordered to be laid down to corn.

'Not that it will sustain us all in our present numbers,' the President told them. 'But we do increase. Our three hogs have become sixty, our chickens nearly five hundred. The weirs and nets for river fishing are in use. Sandy's business doth flourish. My sweet-water well is dug. So that when my term endeth in September—'

He was interrupted by an outcry and many voices exclaiming, '"Twill be renewed!' 'Who else—?' 'John Smith for ever!'

'I thank ye all' the captain said. 'But we be few and I think my enemies be many. However, until Sir Thomas arrives, or we know him to be lost, I will continue, for there is no one who can displace me until Gates cometh or we have other orders from London. The governor for life is to be my Lord de la Warr, who hath been appointed under the King. Gates stands in his stead until my lord be ready to sail.'

The position was unsatisfactory as all the former settlers agreed. They were very critical of the conduct of the ten ships when they heard that the three admirals supposed to guide them, Sir Thomas Gates, Sir George Somers and Captain Christopher Newport, their old friend, had all been together in *Sea Adventure* against orders from the Company and very much against common sense.

'Captain Newport would never let himself be run ashore on a reef,' Mistress Sugden exclaimed, when she heard this aspect of the bad news. 'Happen they two knights overbore his better judgement. We suffer again from our new complement of young gentlemen.'

'Idle as ever!' said Polly, strongly. 'Gathering like sheep before the Town Hall with their elegant clothes and their silly hats!'

'Waiting for the old sheep dog to bite their heels and make them move,' said Alec with a grim smile.

'That is no way to speak to thy President,' rebuked Mistress Forrest. 'Moreover I know a number of those gentry and they be neither idle nor ill-conditioned. Only ignorant of our situation

here, they tell me, for they came intent upon exploration, with James Town for a secure base and they find us scarce able to continue for want of food and from disease.'

'We do none too badly now 'tis summer,' Polly protested. 'Especially now we have our goat. Her kids should be here full soon, when I will make us all butter and cheese.'

William Trent said nothing, but he was absent from home for two weeks after this conversation and came back with a load of hay for the goat on his back, since pasture was so poor at the settlement even for a goat that eats scrub down to the roots and thrives on it. Of the other farm animals, a few sheep and kine, some dogs, a horse belonging to Captain Ratcliffe, some were put in care of the new farmers, some belonged to the young adventurers and the horse was looked after by the groom engaged in England for the purpose.

The President's orders were obeyed. His following kept away from the trouble-makers, while noting which of the settlers declared for them. Among these was George Tucker. Alec had watched him all summer, for he frequented the fishing harbour, neither working nor asking for work and always when Alec approached him turning his back to walk away. The Scot remembered he had been one of the crowning party in Powhatan's capital. He had come forward eagerly to join Alec in an attempt to rescue the would-be assassin, but he had turned back with the rest when Alec ordered them to the boats and went off alone on his errand of mercy. Evidently the shame of his failure still rankled, mixed with the horror of his friend's death, stirring him even more strongly to a hatred that could not die because be needed its justification.

It had not taken long before Polly noticed the loiterer and remarked upon him.

'Is that the one who did mischief to thy mast?' she asked. 'There's not a day passes he doth not go to the jetty and the sheds, wander to and fro, inquire thy whereabouts, would speak with thee, but goes off when the fishing fleet be seen approaching.'

'And how dost know all this?' Alec asked her, smiling at her earnestness. 'Art keeping watch still?'

'Aye,' she answered bluntly. 'They let me take the offal and trimmings from the fish sheds to spread and dig into the pasture

Will makes for our Nanny. ‘Tis a very good and profitable excuse.’

He laughed delightedly; she smiled back. She continued her daily watch and was at length rewarded.

There was a pattern, she saw, in the man’s behaviour. He wandered from the town to the jetty in the morning. If he found the fleet out, their berths empty, he gave a point to his movements by walking slowly past the smoking shed; or if that were not in use, alongside the curing and salting slabs that stood under cover nearer to the water.

There came a day when Alec stayed at home while his fishing craft went out with his crew, his second in command steering her. Polly, about her usual task, saw the loiterer arrive, but instead of merely strolling, make with a quick step to where Alec’s small boat lay on the sand, fastened by its painter to a ring-bolt driven into a rock above the tide mark.

Leaving her work she followed, suspecting the fellow was about some mischief and meaning to discover what it was. So intent was she upon keeping out of sight that she did not notice they were both now out of sight of the sheds, being below them on the sand. So she had no idea of her danger until the man swung round, bounded to her side and grabbed her before she could begin to run.

‘So, little spy!’ he said with an evil laugh. ‘I have thee and thou shalt tell me straight the why and wherefore of it!’

‘I’ll tell thee nowt!’ Polly shouted and yelled, ‘Help!’ at the top of her voice until the villain’s hand closed over her mouth and he made to force her to the ground.

Her panic was not so deep she could not rail inwardly at her folly in falling for such a shabby trick. It was, moreover, very like that former occasion at Witton when Ben Flinders had waylaid her. Only this time Sandy was not reaping near by but far away at sea fishing. She forced the hand away from her mouth and cried out once more before two hands came round her throat to stifle her.

Alec’s fist caught the attacker a first blow behind the ear and as he spun from it a second between the eyes that stretched him on the sand. Polly, gasping, coughing, her eyes blinded by tears, felt herself set back on her feet, and heard Alec’s voice, harsh, furious, order her to her home.

‘Back to thy mother, Poll! Meddler, I might have proved his guilt!’

She understood. He had planned to catch the fellow red-handed about some further mischief to his small craft and she had spoiled his whole plan. She gazed at him, speechless, horror stricken. She saw only a grim mouth, blazing eyes. Sobbing wildly, she scrambled back up the bank and fled for home.

Alec watched the man recover himself, stand up, straighten his clothes, lay a hand on his sword, but take it away again when he saw the knife that had instantly appeared in Alec’s hand.

Neither spoke until the attacker had made his way warily past Alec and was standing on the path above him.

‘Thy doxy hath tempted me these ten days and more,’ he called down insolently? ‘Tis not my fault thy charms no longer content her!’

‘Liar!’ Alec answered, in a low but carrying voice. ‘Liar and coward.’ I know thee, Master George Tucker. If any ill come to me or mine look to thyself for I shall find thee.’

Master Tucker, as discomfited as Polly, for he had expected both to learn from her if Alec had any proof of his suspicions regarding the boat, and also to take his pleasure of her, returned to his hut with his two black eyes and stayed there until evening, avoiding his friends.

Alec went for a short sail to calm his temper. He was already sorry for the way he had spoken to Polly. She was, after all, only a woman, from whom one could not expect the sort of intelligence looked for in a friend. She had meant well. But she would have to learn not to interfere in matters beyond her competence. She would moreover have to be guided by him and obey him.

‘I am thinking of her as if she were already my wife,’ he told himself with a shocked but not altogether unpleasant realisation of all that meant.

When he went home to supper he found that Polly had reached home in a very distraught condition and had retired to her bed, refusing food, crying incessantly and complaining of pain in her eyes and throat.

‘Tis not surprising, seeing she was part strangled when I knocked down her attacker.’

‘Her attacker!’ Mistress Sugden was speechless.

‘Aye, so. She thought to play the spy in my quarrel with Ratcliffe’s faction. ‘Tis lucky I was at the same game or it might have gone ill with her.’

Mistress Sugden jumped up.

‘You speak in this way, you villain, you wretch, of one who—’

Alec was on his feet too, ready to defend himself from the mother’s fury, for her hand was raised to slap his face, which now she could not easily reach. Instead he caught the hand, holding it between both of his.

‘Mistress Sugden,’ he said. ‘Dear, kind, faithful, brave Mistress Meg, I would marry thy daughter. Will’t give me thy consent before I speak to her?’

Mistress Sugden’s face changed. Her anger faded and incredulous joy took its place. But she would not show her relief in words. She said roughly, ‘Aye, lad, if so be thou’rt in earnest. I’ll have no trifling. Be a good husband to her. Love her if thou cans’t. Happen thou’s lost her by thy words to her this day.’

‘I hardly spoke—’ he protested.

‘One sharp word cuts deep,’ she answered. ‘ “Meddler” she told me thou called her.’

‘I’ll to her and ask forgiveness,’ Alec said, but Mistress Sugden forestalled him at the door.

‘Wait thou here, Sandy Nimmo,’ she ordered. ‘Thou hast no rights as yet to my daughter’s bedside. So wait and I’ll persuade her to see thee. If I can,’ she ended with dignity.

Alec waited, half inclined to be angry, half chuckling at the goodwife’s sudden formality. But when Polly at last crept into the room, pale, with reddened eyes and lips that still trembled, he took her in his arms, quite overwhelmed with remorse for his long neglect, his blindness, his hesitation.

‘Forgive me!’ he said again and again. ‘My poor, loving, misused Poll, forgive me!’

He kissed her, was accepted, kissed her again with passion and found an unquestioning, answering passion flooding her body, complementing his own.

‘I would wed thee. Poll’ he whispered. ‘Wilt have me, lassie?’

Still unsure of his real regard, still smarting from the whole upset of the day, she nevertheless felt a suitable triumph and said in tones very like her mother’s, ‘Oh, thou great ill-tempered

bully—my dear and only love—aye. I'll marry thee.'

Chapter Seventeen

Again the single bell in the church rang for a wedding, again President Smith attended the bride and the whole community, friends and foe alike, flocked to see the ceremony. And if there were sidelong looks and sly sneers from those gentlemen who supported Captain Ratcliffe and an open remark from Gabriel Archer about the hazards of marriage to an outlaw, none of it was allowed to come to Alec's ears and the feasting and festivities were kept deliberately low.

For one more ship, a pinnace under Master Francis West, had just arrived, making the seventh of that ill-omened fleet of Governor Gates who still made no appearance nor sent a message of his whereabouts, if indeed he still lived. Of this Master West had no news. He had sailed a sinking ship to the former settlement in the north at Sagadahoc and finding it deserted had stayed only to make repairs and then come on south to Chesapeake Bay.

With Master West's complement of settlers the number of colonists at James Town rose to over five hundred. Captain Smith had provided sparely for half that number. Unless Gates arrived with the other two ships and ample provisions the coming winter would see starvation at a level not dreamed of hitherto.

'For these newcomers be again of no sort to establish us,' the President raged. 'Nay, with the trouble-makers returned, we look to be broken up into warring factions, where distraction and waste will take the place of all my careful planning.'

Captain Samuel Argall nodded.

'I do no good here, nor my crew,' he said. 'Tis best I go back to England with news of this dangerous plight you are in. They cannot know how Sir Thomas Gates and the rest have failed. They must be told that relief is very urgent, so that my Lord de la Warr may speed his own preparations to take over the governorship.'

'Do that,' Smith told him sadly. 'I shall miss thee sorely but it is necessary. May God go with thee.'

Captain Argall sailed away with a sad heart, though he meant to return as soon as he was able. It was clear to him that there would be trouble in the colony when Captain Smith's presidency came to an end in a month's time. Unless Gates arrived the position would be vacant; there would be no legal authority, no leader to make plans, promote fresh effort in trading for food or laying up stocks. In a few weeks the first snows would come, hunting would be difficult, disease and discouragement would bring food gathering to a halt and the former President was not now capable of resisting a decline.

When he took leave of Alec and those other stalwarts prepared to take responsibility the captain warned them of this, though they knew it already.

'He grows old,' Alec said, sadly. 'He used not to care for lesser men's gibes. Nor for their plots against him. I think he sees an end to his usefulness here.'

'And I think you agree with that,' Argall said, looking very straight at Alec.

'He hath aged,' the latter repeated. 'All men age. It is God's law. I do not admire him the less but age hath no place here in this perilous existence.'

Not long after Captain Argall sailed the masters of the ships that lay in the river met together to discuss their situation. All, that is to say, except Master West, who was made much of by the gentlemen adventurers for his successful boldness in surmounting the dangers of the sea in his small pinnace. The masters, honest seamen, having discharged their duty in bringing the settlers to James Town, had no wish whatever to share their privations. So, having discussed the matter among themselves they went to Captain Smith to announce their proposed return to England.

'Ye'll need all the food ye can save,' they told him bluntly. 'We held back sufficient for our voyage home, as you know. If we stay till that be consumed we shall fall upon your stores and that would not be to your liking, sir.'

'Indeed it would not,' Smith agreed. 'But leave us not altogether without ships.'

'There is Captain West's pinnace.'

Smith nodded. He knew that West had decided to join an expedition Captain Ratcliffe was planning to discover food and

perhaps metals in the interior. It was a venture he very much approved, knowing his enemy was inexperienced, incompetent, still overbearing and vain. His absence from the colony, whatever the result, was most desirable.

'Moreover,' the masters of the ships told him, 'there be some would return at once. The long voyage and the unsettled state of things here have frightened them, quite cooled their spirit of adventure.'

'Then good riddance to them, God rot their lily-livered souls!' Captain Smith cried with something of his old boisterous manner.

'We do not propose to take many,' they told him and laughed among themselves afterwards, for they found the settlement an obvious, palpable failure and wondered that any should think it capable of surviving many more months.

Meanwhile Alec, living apart from politics and forebodings in a state of happiness he had not thought possible, enjoyed his Polly and continued his work. Mistress Sugden went to live with Mistress Forrest as friend and housekeeper, taking her chickens with her. Polly kept the goats, now three in number, rejoicing that she had milk at last, to make butter and cheese for her lord.

William Trent kept his room in what was now Alec's house, but he was absent from it most of the time, which caused Alec some anxiety on Polly's account, for he himself was away all day upon the water or at the curing sheds or the salt pans.

However, Mistress Sugden as usual had the remedy. Polly, she declared, should not be left unguarded. Either she or her friend or both would spend most of the day with the girl or else Polly would go to them. The houses were within sight of one another.

This arrangement satisfied Alec for the time being. He still feared a reprisal from Master George Tucker who had made that ill-advised attack upon Polly, bringing down notable punishment upon himself. Alec regretted the loss of direct evidence of the fellow's intention to damage his small boat, but he felt a certain wry gratitude, for had not the whole event brought light to his mind and heart regarding his dear wife? So he kept careful watch and went armed, warned all the women soberly and hoped, without much confidence, that Master Tucker would join his master, Captain Ratcliffe, in the proposed expedition to the Falls beyond Weromancomoco.

‘No chance of that, I warrant,’ Mistress Forrest declared. ‘He is no adventurer, that one. Ready with plots and secret acts of villainy, but he lacks direct courage, as our Sandy knoweth. Moreover they tell me he frequents Mistress Bartlett to the exclusion of her other customers. She is quite infatuated, rumour hath it.’

‘I think he looks to provide himself with a lodging for the winter,’ Mistress Sugden suggested. ‘She hath saved up those gifts in kind men have presented her in lieu of money payment. For a private store of food there can be few to equal hers.’

This estimate was a true one and no one was surprised when Master Tucker abandoned his small bare cabin for the far more comfortable home at the former ‘Honeypot’. This move was not much resented in the colony, for among the large increase in the population there was a considerable number of women, among them several professional doxies, perfectly willing to ply their trade in their new surroundings.

In his preoccupation with his marriage, his business and his care for his own and his family’s safety, Alec was fully occupied. So it came to him as a great shock and instant matter of remorse when he learned one day of the terrible accident that had just befallen President Smith. In the explosion of a powder-bag that he was wearing suspended from his waist he had been most severely burned about the body and thighs and was not expected to live.

Alec went to him immediately. All his easily accepted conclusions about the old soldier’s decline fell to the ground. He was ashamed of himself for holding them, full of contrition for his neglect of the President in thought and deed. Was it truly an accident or should he have been there to guard the most precious life in James Town?

‘Nay, ‘twas no treachery, lad,’ Captain Smith told him faintly. ‘But mine own fault, for which I look to pay the final penalty.’

His agony was very great. Alec had neither the knowledge nor the means to relieve it, though Polly sacrificed some of her precious butter to soothe the edges of the terrible deep burns and Will brought a concoction that rendered the sufferer unconscious for a time. Fearing it was poison, he refused a second dose. His indomitable courage and wonderfully strong constitution did save his life in the first days of pain and shock

but it was clear he could not live through the winter in his reduced state and his wounds' untreated condition. There was now neither physician nor surgeon in James Town. He must go home to England.

The news of his going was received with calm. It was clear it had been expected for some time, accident or otherwise.

Captain Ratcliffe with West and many of the turbulent gentlemen had already started on their journey in search of food and wealth. Apart from Alec and his friends the only mourner was the Princess Pocahontas, a frequent visitor to the colony since her difference with her father.

She was present at the parting when the injured man was carried to the last of the ships to leave. She wept and cried aloud, holding his hands pressed to her bosom, unwilling to loose them for she believed she would never see him again.

'My little love, my little beauty,' Captain Smith groaned. 'You must let me go, my dear. My time here is over. Remember I am an old man. Thou wilt love more wisely when I am gone.'

So he sailed away and for a time the talk and the conjectures and the stories about the President and the Princess continued. But Alec felt merely a large grief, a new regret for the end of his last hero worship, for the end of his youth; but an enhancement of his responsibility in this faction-torn, impoverished, struggling community.

By the end of September there was still no sign of Sir Thomas Gates. Then Francis West with a few stragglers, the survivors of Captain Ratcliffe's expedition, came back from the Falls. The Indians had been hostile, the result complete failure, the captain and most of his gentlemen slain. In despair, West went aboard his pinnace, hastily provisioned, and left for England to describe the now desperate state of things at James Town, the probable loss of Gates, Somers and Newport, the approach of famine.

So without any real leader, with no ships but a few fishing boats and other small craft, the settlement sank into a state of stupor, awaiting their fate.

But Alec continued to store fish. John Laydon and other craftsmen abandoned their skills to hunt or to dig for those nourishing roots, the so-called 'earth-apples' or 'potato' as the Indians called them. Will Trent led away the nanny-goat and her kids, for safety, he said, and for increase the following spring

when the billy-kid would be capable. He knew, before the general realisation, what was coming for all the live-stock in the town. By the end of October Anne Laydon was eight months pregnant and Polly too was expecting her first child the following May.

Before the snow drove the game deep into the great forests the provident settlers brought in venison and wild turkeys and even the occasional mountain bear that had strayed south from his natural haunts. All these they dried and salted, making severe inroads upon Alec's supply of brine or solid salt. Among those who came to him for it was George Tucker, very quiet and humble, beginning his request with an apology that Alec knew was far from sincere. But he no longer feared to suffer harm from the man, since his associates were all gone, West and Archer to England, Ratcliffe to his just reward, he hoped. So Tucker had his share of the salt and carried it away to Rose Bartlett's house which he now shared openly and shamelessly.

'He should marry her,' Mistress Sugden declared. 'She hath altogether turned from her wantonness and is a true wife to him.'

'He considers himself a gentleman,' Mistress Forrest told her. 'Therefore marriage to a whore, however reformed, would never enter his head.'

It did however enter Mistress Bartlett's head, in spite of her infatuation, that unfair demands were being made upon her. She approached the subject in various gentle ways, but got no response. It was when the dreaded winter, with its deep snow, heavy frosts and biting winds was well upon them that her patience broke and she accused him of trying to corrupt her afresh. At first he treated her accusation with cold sneers.

'It scarce becomes thee, Rose, to quarrel with my desires. I do but suggest thou employ thy charms as heretofore in the way of business that might profit us both. We shall have meat but no bread. The ration will be ended before long. In exchange for the grain they do not want, men—'

She forced him to stop with a stamp of her foot and a high scream that brought him to his feet to put an end to her outburst. But she backed away from him crying out, though not so loudly, 'Villain, scoundrel, pimp, would-be purveyor of women! Thou knows I gave that up when I was so foolish as to

love thee! Love such a wretch as would betray me to fill his stomach! Thou shalt live no longer in my house, no longer, I say! Loll over my fire not even gathering logs for it! Force me to earn even thy warming by infamy!'

'We have lived these many weeks already upon thy past warming of other men,' he said, watching her.

She sprang at him, nails reaching for his face, but he caught her wrists together and swung her round and flung her to the floor. She was gathering herself up and had scrambled to her knees when a heavy blow to the back of her head felled her again. This time she did not move to rise.

Master Tucker hid the bloodstained tomahawk. He had bought it from a visiting Indian with a small quantity of firearm powder, a crime in settlement law. Later he took the weapon into the forest and dropped it in the deep snow. He laid Rose Bartlett on her bed when the blood ceased to run, cleansed the hut and called in his friends to sympathise with his grief at her sudden seizure and death.

He ordered a coffin to be made for her. The weather was so cold there was no immediate haste needed as in the summer months. So no one was surprised that he refused all help with the laying-out of his poor paramour. Many put down her death to the excesses of her former life. A premature end from venal diseases was not uncommon, they reminded one another.

After three days a coffin was delivered in the morning at the door of the 'Honeypot' and an hour later a small procession of four bearers with Master Tucker, pale but composed, in the rear, passed the church on the way to the burial ground where three other graves beside that destined for Rose had been dug overnight in the hard ground.

At the church door stood Master Hunt in his robes, who stepped forward.

'I am about to pronounce the burial service over three more of our number,' he said. 'Will you not bring this poor sinner in, Master Tucker, that I may join her to our prayers for mercy and the forgiveness of sins? 'There shall be more joy over one sinner that repenteth—" '

'I thank you,' said Master Tucker very coldly. 'She had your enmity when she lived. I think she cannot profit from a turnabout now that she is dead. Proceed, friends,' he said to the

bearers and left the clergyman, purple-faced and trembling with rage at the church door.

Ann Laydon's child, a boy, was born in the first week of December. She was attended by Mistress Sugden for the birth, which was easy, though labour was prolonged, it being her first. John spent the hours of anxiety with Alec, for he declared he could not work with glass at such a time for fear of spoiling good materials. As the weather was colder than ever, Alec was stopped from fishing, for the gear was dangerously frozen and ice covered the shallow parts of the river and the bay. Only the central tidal waters were open.

In spite of short commons for the last three months Anne's baby was plump and lusty and although the mother had grown very thin her breasts soon produced a fair abundance of milk, which astonished Polly and Alec as well as the father, who had felt very fearful for his child's sustenance. Mistress Sugden, however, greeted it as a natural occurrence, only insisting that they all work harder than ever to supply the young mother with plenty to eat.

'At home,' Mistress Forrest said severely, upholding Anne's protests, 'mother's milk is not in favour. A little thin gruel—'

'For which we have no grain,' Anne lamented.

But Alec remembered a dispute on these lines at Oxford, in the house of his benefactor's married son whose wife was breast-feeding her baby. He recounted the story, upholding Mistress Sugden's opinion that Nature knew her work and moreover the babe thrived, which was patently the case.

The winter moved on to a comfortless Christmas, a continual tightening of belts and a growing lawlessness. Alec was much at home because his occupation had come almost to a standstill. Also because Polly was often unwell. The earlier manifestations of her pregnancy, a frequent vomiting, headaches and restlessness, had passed but had left her very thin and languid. She was much encouraged by the total success of Anne's confinement, but by January, when death became a daily, expected, multiple event and there were still four months of waiting before her, she began to weaken.

Alec comforted her as best he could.

'My son will be a melancholy coward if thou breed him with all these fears and qualms about thee,' he teased her.

But when she wept at this he took her in his arms and kissed her wet cheeks and whispered his praise, his admiration, his firm belief in their survival, all three.

'The good Lord will not punish *thee* for *my* sins,' he told her. 'Master Hunt says continually it is the fault of the arrogant and lazy who would make no provision.'

'Men do not reckon up their sins when they be hungry,' Mistress Sugden insisted. 'Tis not now disease that brings them to their coffins, but plain starvation. When a man's clemmed he's not answerable.'

By the end of February, the snow still deep, the frost still iron-hard on the ground, many houses were empty, smoke rose from fewer and fewer as the days passed. Not many folk moved about the streets. Some sat or lay indoors, too feeble even to gather wood for warmth, waiting only to join the larger number who now filled the church in their coffins, even in their shrouds, waiting for burial in the thaw, if there were any left to bury them.

Polly's mother had brought her friend to Alec's house at Christmas time for economy in firing and food. They stayed on to look after Polly while he and a few other stalwarts cut wood in the forest. Soon John Laydon brought his wife and the baby to lodge there also. Warmth had grown almost more pressing a need than food and as the days passed and men's strength ebbed they sought the nearest, most easily won fuel in the shape of their dead neighbour's furniture and goods. So the Laydons, and the two older women brought everything they prized to Alec's house to preserve it from attack.

Alec still went armed, for Master Tucker and three friends had survived into the New Year and were often near him at his wood cutting. The four exchanged hard looks with the Scot who usually had John Laydon and one or more of his fishermen with him. Then one day Tucker was seen with but one companion and later still alone.

Alec said to him, 'Where be thy friends?'

'Where thine are not,' the man answered, with a sidelong evil glance. 'In the church whither starvation led them.'

This surprised Alec for until very recently they had all seemed reasonably strong, though very thin as was to be expected.

He said no more, but after deep thought he went to the

preacher that evening to put his suspicions before him. And the outcome of that was a secret visit to the church by Mr Hunt, three older members of the regular congregation, together with Alec and John. They opened the three coffins. The bodies, in that intense cold, were perfectly preserved. In each corpse they found a blackened mouth, a twisted look of horror, staring eyes, a contorted body.

'Poison, by the Lord!' one elder said.

'As I suspected,' Alec agreed. 'Master Tucker favours the secret crime.'

'We cannot prove it,' John Laydon objected.

'Nay, but we know the man hath no illness himself and is surprisingly well nourished.'

'You believe he is helped by the natives and hath secured poison from them?' Master Hunt asked.

'I believe a worse thing than that,' Alec said.

He was remembering the brine Tucker had taken from the fish-curing shed to salt down venison. He was remembering Rose Bartlett's sudden death and swift burial.

The party listened. They shook their heads. It would not be possible to dig up her coffin even could they discover where it lay. But one of the elders had followed that cortège out of compassion when Master Tucker had refused Master Hunt's offer of a burial service. He led them to the spot beyond the tar swamp where the coffin had been lowered into a shallow grave. They managed to break it loose and open it, when Alec's terrible surmise was found to be true. Rose Bartlett's head was there, the skull shattered at the back by a great blow. Her ribs and spine were there, her hands and feet, her entrails, lungs and heart. But her limbs and the fleshy parts of her body were not.

'I think he hath salted her down,' said Alec, 'and I think his friends discovered it.'

The men about him groaned aloud. Their horror and their disgust were great but greater still was their felt need to punish a crime that was not only murder but blasphemy, an insult to God the Creator of Man in His image. It was not unheard of among savages and shipwrecked sailors. But with their community in its present state immediate punishment was needed.

So they went in a body to Master Tucker's hut. He paled when

he saw Alec among them but did not dispute their entrance. The elders examined his cask of salted meat in which a fair store still remained. It was clearly not venison, but human.

When he heard how he had been exposed he made an attempt upon Alec but was overcome and bound securely.

Alec said, 'I suspected this man because I knew he was evil, having attempted my life by injuring my *Shallop Pearl*.' He said to Tucker, 'I led these men to disclose your crime, your four murders and—and *this*. But I will have no part in your punishment. I will be neither judge nor jury.'

He left the hut and went home with John where they said nothing to the women of what they had been about.

The others argued for more than two hours about what course to take. Master Tucker must die; that was certain. But how? And who would take the responsibility? There was not one among them capable of forming a Court of Law and proceeding by it in a traditional manner. But they would not take a life in cold blood, illegally.

In the end Master Tucker, who had occupied himself during their deliberations by loosening his bonds, leaped up suddenly and fled. Night had fallen, the pursuit was hampered by darkness. Tucker dared not seek the forest where the Indians lurked but running the other way past the plantations, came to the high banks above the estuary, missed his footing, fell upright and broke both his ankles, before rolling half-way down the sand towards the water.

His pursuers found him, noted his injuries, withdrew well above the tide mark and settled down to watch his end. The Lord God had smitten him, the servant of the Lord, the sea, would take him to his just doom.

At first George Tucker struggled to avoid his fate. He appealed for mercy, he begged for pity. Seeing it was useless he cursed his enemies, his friends, his failed life, his distant parents, his birth, his tempter the Devil. Even at last he cursed his God.

There was time. The tide was only half-way down when he fell rolling on to the wet sand. It continued down for another three hours and then turned, taking five to reach him. By this time he was silent, nearly dead from cold and pain but able, when the first wave broke over him, to shriek once or twice as it nudged him over on to his face and pulled him back again.

It was daylight by now. The news had spread. Every ablebodied man and woman had crept to the shore to see George Tucker pay for his unspeakable deeds.

The sea tossed him up and down, finally drowned him leaving his limp body on the beach. So they carried him back into the 'Honeypot' and burned it to the ground, together with Rose Bartlett's coffin and all her poor desecrated remains.

Chapter Eighteen

As John and Alec found there was no keeping the news of George Tucker's exposure and end from the women, they gave them a true account of it, denying the more horrifying exaggerations as lying rumours. But the crime was fearful enough even in plain fact to increase their terrors and dread forebodings. If the settlers became cannibals in their extremity of starvation what hope was there for the safety of women and little children? Anne clasped her baby, declaring she feared to let him learn to walk in case he should be enticed away from her.

'We shall all be dead and gone long before the poor atom stands on his own feet,' Mistress Forrest said.

It was now that Will Trent intervened to calm their fears. He had been absent the most part of the winter, only making occasional visits to see how his sister, fared and each time bringing gifts of food, the corn they totally lacked, a little meat, a shrunken but most acceptable pumpkin of last summer's crop. He now suggested that all the women should move out to the Pamunkeys' chief settlement. The werowance was willing to provide a wigwam for them and billet them as members of his tribe until the spring. He desired in return that they bring their spinning wheels and looms and teach his squaws the crafts.

At first the answer was a flat refusal from the women, but both Alec and John saw the advantages of the plan to them all. Matters could only grow worse in James Town. Will was in high favour with Opecancanough; he would protect them. While they could be of no use to the dwindling survivors they themselves would return to the town if the conditions they found among the Indians were favourable.

So very early one morning, with Will to guide them, the Nimmos, the Laydons, Mistress Sugden and Mistress Forrest went quietly from the house they had all been sharing and arrived, under Will's care, at the village of the werowance. They were presented to him, offered their thanks, showed him the looms and spindles and were conducted to their new home.

There they found two Indian women, one with a child of about eighteen months standing clasping her leg, the other with a babe at her breast, suckling undisturbed by the invasion.

'They have been preparing your welcome,' Will said. 'But now they will go home.'

He spoke to them in the Algonquian language of the tribe and they nodded their heads and moved to the opening of the wigwam.

Mistress Sugden, who had stared at them in astonishment, now exclaimed, pointing to the children, both unusually light-skinned, though their hair was as straight and as black as their mother's. 'Will, these be thy brats! Thou cans't not deny it!'

'I would not wish to deny them,' her brother answered calmly. 'I am married to their mothers by the law of the Pamunkeys, which I acknowledge to be as binding as the English law. Which drove me from my native land,' he added, with a flash of his old bitterness. 'See that you all respect them and treat them well as Opecancanough hath treated you. You will be safe here and well cared for so long as you do not put on airs that ill become your present fortunes.'

He stared intently at Mistress Forrest as he spoke, but she looked back at him with a gentle smile of assent, saying nothing.

In private John and Alec laughed together over Will's two brown wives and ochre-coloured infants.

'When we thought it was his dreadful past had crazed his mind, in truth he had turned more native than his native torturers,' John said.

'Nay, jest not too freely,' Alec answered. 'He was crazed enough

when we first came to this land and found him. But after Mother Meg restored him to himself he must have had a fresh desire for those Indian ways of living he had been forced to follow so long.'

'And maybe some new disgust for his own folk's feebleness.'

'Aye, that too. When he found this werowance regarded him as a supernatural, a wise man, giving him wives to content him —'

They collapsed into laughter again, chiefly at their own former half superstitious attitude towards Will.

'A very ordinary man after all' John concluded.

But Alec shook his head. He knew more about Indian treachery and Indian cruelty than his friend. Will was extraordinary, but wholly to be trusted, otherwise he would not have consented to leave his Polly in such company.

So the winter slowly passed in privation, fear and much suffering. At any time during those months the native owners of the land could without much trouble or bloodshed have got rid of the strangers altogether. But this they did not do. Others beside the Sugdens managed to billet themselves upon Indian homes, to emerge in the early spring, shamefaced, occasionally grateful, at any rate alive.

When the snow melted they buried their dead in the new cemetery. Some ninety souls were left out of the five hundred that formed the colony when President Smith went home. There were to be no more than sixty when in May help came at last.

Polly was brought to bed a week before this happened. Her labour was not so easy as Anne Laydon's, chiefly because she had found Indian food difficult to digest and had made no headway towards friendship with her red-brown aunts by marriage.

Alec endured as John had done, well aware of Polly's frailty and inclined to blame himself for her suffering.

'Why dids't marry her then?' Mistress Sugden said roughly. 'Children be the principal part of a marriage as every father knoweth. Go ask John. I warrant thy pains will pass with my Poll's and there's no danger in them for thee as there is, in her weakness, for her.'

Alec groaned,

'Danger! Alas, my poor Poll! My pretty dear! Danger to her or to the babe?'

'To both. So take thy moanings and groanings elsewhere and seek not to interfere in work thou hast no knowledge of!'

'He had not done so, but he was not too upset to see he was not wanted in the house. Mistress Forrest who had gone back to her own place when the family returned from the Indians, met him at his own door. She stopped to inquire after Polly, nodding wisely when he gave her the latest news in a distracted voice.

'Nay, Sandy, thou cans't do nought. 'Twere better to see to thy craft for we now depend wholly upon you fishermen to keep us alive until the first corn come up.'

This was true. So, much against his impulsive nature that demanded he find himself some remedy for Polly's agonising delay in giving birth, he assembled his crew and put out to sea, praying his much-loved wife might be alive when he returned, even if his expected son were dead.

Polly was alive and well he found that evening, also the child, which was a very small but well-formed girl.

'Thou hast a daughter, my son,' Mistress Sugden told him cautiously, fearing an outburst that might come to Polly's ears. 'The young wife had wept bitterly when she heard the news, for she knew what great store Alec had set upon a boy.

But he did not cry out or complain or show any kind of disappointment. He merely said, 'And my Poll, Mistress Mother, how fares my Poll?'

'Resting as she deserves. Aye, go to her, son. She longs for a sight of thee.'

His disappointment was indeed very bitter but he did not feel it at once because he could only be thankful that Polly had survived her ordeal. He knelt at the bedside, not daring to touch her, but laying his face near her hand and praying aloud that her recovery would be as easy and short as the labour had been long and difficult.

'I would it had been a boy,' she whispered.

'I am content,' he answered. 'Well content, my love.'

But she noticed that he did not trouble to look at the baby when he rose at last and left her. She had failed him, she thought, thereby withering a large part of the delicate plant their love had always been.

'This will not be the only child thou'lt bear him, please God,' her mother chided her. 'One would think girls were sent by the Devil to plague men, not to keep their homes and bear their brats!'

'The Devil sends plenty,' Polly answered quick to defend her man. 'He wanted a lawful lad of his own and I longed to give it him. Now he will hanker again for his bastard as he did before we wed.'

This was not exactly true, for Alec had no wish to go back and indeed saw no likelihood of returning to England, nor did he intend to disturb Francis yet again by altering his friend's relationship with the boy.

But his disappointment went very deep. He liked women but thought little of their brains and abilities. He accepted the views of his time; it was a man's world, in which women took a low place in men's estimation. He continued to make much of Polly, showing her a greater affection than ever before. He remembered his terror at the thought of losing her and was duly grateful to God for sparing her and bringing her safely back to health. But he paid no attention at all to the being in the cradle at her bedside.

Until one day, coming home from the boats he found the new-born child in Mistress Sugden's arms, bawling her small head off.

'"Tis well thou'rt come,' the goodwife said briskly, 'for I can do nowt to stop her. She waits to be fed and Polly's at stool, so she must wait longer. Take her, Sandy, while I see to Poll.'

He backed away but Mistress Sugden would have no nonsense, as she declared roundly.

'The little lass is thine. Happen thou'll astonish her into silence, seeing thou'st never yet had her in thy arms.'

'I fear … 'Too rough … so small … Come ye back, Mother, she be taken in a fit now! I'll not be responsible!'

For the babe yelled even louder in Alec's unaccustomed grip, he squeezing her tightly for fear of dropping her.

'Shell do fine. 'That's no fit, 'tis temper and thy awkwardness. Walk her up and down; speak to her. She'll come to no harm, a right lusty babe an' all. She'll see us into our graves, I reckon. Girls be more strong at birth than boys. The good Lord knows they ha' need to be.'

Alone with his daughter, whose cries began to diminish, Alec carried her to the door of the house to get a good look at her. The little face was red, the eyes screwed up, die mouth opening regularly to bawl but sometimes closing upon a tiny fist at which she sucked frantically until, disappointed of the longed-for milk, she cried out again.

'Poor atom!' Alec thought, with unexpected tenderness. 'So ugly, so furious, so unreasonable, so insistent. Thoult survive us all, as grandmother says.'

He was about to carry her in to Poll when John came running to say there were ships in the river and it looked like *Sea Venture* come at last to their aid.

Sir Thomas Gates had indeed arrived with Sir George Somers in a second ship, and a pinnace carried in each. Between them they had a hundred and fifty new settlers, gentlemen, craftsmen and labourers, with plentiful supplies from the Bermuda island where they had passed a comfortable winter in surroundings they described as a paradise.

They had come there in leaking ships, blown out of course by the hurricane, but conned to safety by Somers, who discovered the islands in time before their vessel with one sister ship foundered. Like those others who had been separated from them they made their repairs, wanting for nothing in the way of food and waiting for good weather in the spring before venturing to complete the voyage to James Town.

'Seeing we had all we needed we knew nothing of your need,' Governor Gates explained to the emaciated survivors who welcomed him. They spoke in a feeble, dazed manner, for they had grown so accustomed to death they could not at first accept their deliverance.

Alec and his friends conducted the governor to the Town Hall, unused since President Smith had left, and to the church, equally dilapidated for Master Hunt had succumbed in January and there was no other minister to conduct a service or attend to the upkeep of the building.

After viewing the town and giving orders for the instant relief of the famine the Governor with Sir George Somers, his principal, gentlemen and shipmasters, held a conference. Destruction and failure had gone too far, they decided. There was nothing for it but to abandon this ill-omened place, take the survivors and go north to Newfoundland, where at St John's a new, enlarged colony was now thriving.

'We have here seen but two industries of any promise,' Gates explained. 'The fishing managed by Master Nimmo and the glass-making conducted by Master Laydon, They can be set up again with more profit at St John's.'

At this point his secretary reminded him of a letter he bore for this same Master Nimmo, so that tall Scot was called and seen privately by the Governor, after which he went home in a state of great excitement.

'I have further news from Master Angus Leslie,' he told them all. 'He writes that the King considered a free pardon for me

which he hopes will be sent with the new governor.'

'But Sir Thomas hath it not?' asked Mistress Forrest 'Or doth the good alderman mean my Lord de la Warr, who is appointed life governor to follow Sir Thomas?'

'Seeing we leave this accursed spot as swiftly as may be, I doubt me thou'lt ever see that pardon given or not' said Mistress Sugden bluntly.

'Aye,' Alec agreed laughing. 'Besides, it profits me nothing, for I am no outlaw here but a very respected citizen.' He told them about his interview with Gates from which they understood that he had been given a free hand to assemble the surviving settlers for leaving.

At the beginning of June they were ready to go. Polly feared the voyage more than most, on account of her baby; Anne Laydon was pregnant again and had similar fears for her little son. Will Trent refused to go, moved his few belongings to his second home in the forest but hung about James Town on the day of embarkation.

'He hath a secret wish to go with us, but dare not leave those women nor his half-breed offspring,' Alec said.

But Mistress Sugden said nothing, because Will refused to say goodbye to her. Only when they were all aboard and her brother had disappeared in his usual sudden, silent manner, she spoke about him at last.

'I came here to find and cherish him,' she said, tearfully. 'He was mad and I cured him. Now I must go and his madness hath come upon him again.'

'How so?' Polly asked, clasping her little daughter more tightly as the vessel began to move.

'He said it was no farewell for he would see us all again very soon.'

'In heaven above, did he mean?' asked Alec grimly, at which the woman exclaimed, thinking of shipwreck.

'Just madness, meaning nowt,' Mistress Sugden said, wiping her eyes.

But Will was right and he was not mad, only better informed by his Indian friends. For they had received news the day before the final embarkation of the approach of three great ships making for Cape Henry. As Gates and Somers were still in the river that day they met these ships sailing towards them when

they reached the bay. On board were Lord de la Warr, about three hundred new settlers and very ample provisions of food, materials of all kinds, cattle, dogs and horses.

The exodus was stopped. James Town was saved. Will Trent's sanity was never again suspected, though he was publicly reprimanded for his secrecy.

Lord de la Warr was as shocked as Sir Thomas Gates to see the appalling state the settlement had fallen into. He had no doubt whatever of the cause and lost no time in calling together the whole community to hear his opinion of them.

It was their idleness, their stupidity, their sheer incompetence that had brought them so low, he told them. It could no longer be endured. Words of warning, scoldings, admonitions, even beatings, were no good, it seemed. So more drastic means would be applied. There would be no given rations. Each man would have three acres of land to cultivate as he wished. He would live on the proceeds, whether as food produced or exchanged.

The early settlers were horrified; even those who had come with Sir Thomas complained, for they had found food gathering easy enough in Bermuda. But Lord de la Warr would not be turned from his new law, though he relented enough to issue food as rations until the starving had recovered their strength and the first harvest of the year could be gathered.

To supplement the much-needed provisions Sir George Somers and Captain Argall, who had returned in Lord de la Warr's fleet, set off at once for Bermuda to bring back hogs and corn.

Alec was delighted to see Sam Argall again and would have gone with him if he could have left home. But as he said, 'I am tied by my wife's apron strings and by the swaddling bands of my little useless maid.'

Captain Argall laughed heartily, teasing him.

'She'll have her uses anon,' he said. 'Nought to be ashamed of, Sandy. Thou'll get thee a boy in good time, never fear.'

Lord de la Warr's very carefully hand-picked new colonists set to work with great energy to repair the whole of poor, neglected, decayed James Town. The houses they built upon the foundations of the old ones were much superior to them. They had two storeys for the most part, some even garret rooms above that, with gabled roofs and tall chimneys as the fashion was in England. They had staircases to the upper rooms with in some

cases carved balusters supporting the handrails. The windows were all latticed, which gave John Laydon, now head of the very much enlarged glass-making factory, plenty of work close at hand to occupy several newly arrived members of his craft.

Alec had come to Lord de la Warr's notice a very few days after his arrival. 'the new governor went down to the fish harbour with his secretary, his gentlemen in attendance and a young man called John Rolfe who made a point of speaking to Alec, drawing him aside to do so.

'I think you sent home some samples of herbs, medicinal and suchlike,' he began, without preamble. 'Cotton, with a sample of thread spun from it and a piece of cloth woven from the thread.'

'Ye be a cloth merchant or maybe a tailor,' Alec asked, knowing the newcomer to be neither, but wishing to return to his lordship in order to show him the curing sheds.

'Neither,' Master Rolfe answered, flushing but keeping his voice calm. 'My real interest lies in another weed—'

'Tobacco?' asked Alec and when the other nodded went on, 'Why did ye not mention it at once? We have grown a bit, the naturals grow it for their ritual pipe smoking. I cannot say I care overmuch for it myself.'

He began to move away but Rolfe caught him up. 'I would be very greatly obliged, Master Nimmo, if you would show me what you have grown. I have read of the Spanish cultivation. I think I could improve—'

Alec swung round.

'Look'ee, master,' he said. 'I have to attend his lordship just now. But go you back and inquire for Mistress Sugden that lives at the house of Mistress Forrest. Tell her Sandy Nimmo sent you to look at her tobacco plants. Do as you will with them, or as she'll allow you. My business is not on land.'

This time Rolfe let him go, but his purpose was strong and he very soon persuaded Polly and her mother that he meant to improve the cultivation of the poor weed they were inclined to despise, thinking far more highly of the cotton, whose use seemed to them more profitable.

The colony had been saved in June of that year. By August it presented a very altered appearance and though many of the newcomers had fallen ill of the usual scourges, the proportion of those seriously afflicted was far smaller than with earlier

arrivals. The new personally-owned plots were showing the result of Lord de la Warr's encouragement to work, quite literally, for their lives. A larger leavening of women helped to keep the men in the plantations, for they would not have them idling at home. Many had come as whole families with older children who were delighted with the freedom of their new surroundings, learning to shoot with bow and arrow and flash about the river in birch-bark canoes.

But a day came in August when Alec returned from a visit to the Governor with news that caused consternation, bewilderment and grief to Polly, who heard it first and then, when she ran crying from the house, to her mother and her friend.

For the Lord de la Warr had welcomed his fish-merchant, as he called him, very cordially. He had congratulated him upon his great achievements in the colony, upon his loyalty, upon his various military exploits.

'That must be Captain Smith,' Alec exclaimed, for he could not recall having performed any military exploits whatever. 'He was a very good friend to me, my lord,' he added.

'And you to him, I think,' his lordship said, smiling. 'I must tell you I have brought news that I postponed giving you until I judged the reports given of you in England were substantially true. Nay, do not spoil all sir, by a hasty answer. That aspect of your nature is already well known in London.'

But he smiled again as he said this, so Alec swallowed his sudden rage and bowed low to cover his confusion.

'You are pardoned, Master Nimmo,' the Governor told him. 'A free pardon that you are to receive at the hands of His Majesty, King James, himself.'

'But … but…'

'There can be no dispute, no refusal,' went on his lordship, blandly. 'It is a command, laid upon me by the King, to deliver to you. Sir Thomas Gates returns to England next month. You will sail with him.'

'But my lord, I have a wife and a very young—a very young child. 'Too young for such a journey, yet how—'

'You will sail,' said his lordship coldly, turning to his secretary to conduct Alec from his presence.

So Polly fled for advice and comfort, weeping, and Alec, with

very mixed feelings, followed her slowly to Mistress Forrest's house, carrying his little bouncing, chuckling, toothless, three-month-old daughter on his arm. After he had told his tale several times over he took his wife and child home again.

Polly loved him too well to hinder his preparations. Nor in their discussions did she ever cast up his past in his face to justify her grief and anger at their parting.

'It will not be for long,' he kept insisting. 'I must receive my pardon and pray God His Majesty doth not keep me waiting for it. I must see my good friends who have worked for this all the time of my—he nearly said 'exile' but caught that back '—of my outlawry. I must go north to acquaint my parents of it and maybe see Dr Macllroy and the laird of Kilessie.'

'And thy old love Janet?'

'Aye. Mistress Galbraith and her bairns. And Mistress Kate Leslie and my bastard son, a second Francis, as his adoptive father hath called him.'

He said all this steadily, defying her to attack him for if. But though she grew stern she said nothing.

When the parting came in September it was Alec who clung to her, weeping openly and Polly, white-faced, who held back her tears until the ship passed out of sight, carrying him away from her.

'You'll not see that fine lad again,' Mistress Sugden told her. 'If yon brat had been a boy now—'

'Happen the new one will be so,' Polly answered, drying her eyes.

'The new… Thou means—'

'Aye. I have the next within me. A son for him, please God.'

'He knows of this?' Mistress Sugden was inclined to laugh. 'Minx, to secure him thus!'

'Twas the Lord's doing I should fall again so soon. Never mine. But I have not told him of it. When he returns he'll see how it is with me.'

'Not tell him! Then indeed thou' lt never see him more.'

'If he truly loves me now,' Polly said with a set face, 'he'll return. If not, then not and the Good Lord keep me and mine!'

Chapter Nineteen

The first hazard Sir Thomas Gates's barque met with on the long voyage home was in Thames mouth, where a light mist at the North Foreland deepened to a heavy fog as they crept carefully into Tilbury. So thick was it that their arrival was heralded by men in tugs and small rowing boats, announcing themselves with shouting and blowing of horns, appearing alongside or dead ahead so suddenly they escaped collision only by frantic sculling or rapid going-about in the very light airs.

But their voices were music in the ears of the crew and passengers who had been absent so many anxious months in strange parts, that now seemed more frightful in retrospect than they had in actual experience. They shouted back, their several accents from many counties forming a counter-point to the raucous cockney of their willing helpers.

In a couple of hours *Deliverance*, chosen at James Town in preference to *Sea Venture* as the more seaworthy of the available ships, was berthed, safely moored fore and aft in the river off Tilbury, with her boats down to take the ex-Governor, the quality and the ship's master ashore. Alec, promoted to a gentleman's privileges since his pardon, was one of them. There was no one on shore to meet him.

His first feeling was of astonishment. His next of anger. Finally, with the rapid suppression of his temper and his new powers of experienced endurance, he accepted the unlooked-for neglect. It was more than three years since he was last in London. Why should anyone remember him? Since Sir Thomas and his friends had by now left the docks on horses brought there by his family servants, Alec decided to find a mount for himself and follow them into the city.

But while he hesitated a voice hailed him from the water and turning towards the quay where he had lately landed he saw the familiar face of Olaf Henderson's bo'sun standing at the helm of a shallop with a strong rowing crew of six young Scandinavians.

'The master hath sent to find thee, Master Nimmo. Or be it still Master Jock Bridie?'

He and his crew as well as Alec roared with laughter and as soon as his luggage was hoisted aboard the shallop, Alec followed and the boat sped up the river again, for the tide that had brought in *Deliverance* was still running in their favour.

The Queen of Denmark was in the Pool at her usual anchorage. Alec met with a great welcome as he arrived on deck out of the surrounding fog. And there, standing next to the merchant-captain was Master Angus Leslie, to whom Alec dropped on one knee and kissed his hand in heartfelt gratitude.

'Nay, lad,' Master Leslie said. 'I am not deserving of such homage! Tis thine own merit hath won thee the pardon. And thine own fortitude with God's blessing, no doubt, that hath preserved thee. Get up, boy, and greet these other friends who rejoice in thy present deliverance.'

Alec did so, to find, crowding round him, Olaf and most of his former crew, Captain Smithson of *Sunflower*, again discharging coal from Leith, and standing behind his master, Alderman Leslie's manservant, Walter, who had done so much for Alec at all times.

'But how—?' The young man was still astonished that they knew of his arrival in time to arrange this scene. 'In this weather we nearly missed the Foreland and next made to sail into the Medway, but saw our mistake in time before running aground.'

'You were sighted at the Lizard,' Captain Henderson said. 'And again off the Isle of Wight and Beachy Head. Thence by calculation when these reports reached London—only yesterday—we came to expect you today and judged rightly.'

There was a meal in his honour on *The Queen of Denmark* and many toasts were drunk. At last the alderman moved to leave with promises to meet again at the former's house in Gracious Street. Horses were waiting for them when they landed.

As they rode up the streets so well remembered. Alec's feelings overcame him once more. His welcome had been wonderful, all that he could have wished, far more than he deserved. But for one thing.

'And Francis?' he asked, in a strained voice as they rode.

'Is in Oxford,' answered Master Leslie gravely. 'With Dr Ogilvy's son Richard and his wife and family. You remember the house?'

'Very well,' Alec answered, swallowing his bitter

disappointment. ‘Richard Ogilvy, Francis’s brother-in-law and Celia and a fine babe.’

‘There be four there now. So Francis goes there often, for my lady—’

‘*My lady*?’

‘Francis had a knighthood bestowed for his work on the Bible. All finished now and ready to appear from the printers next spring.’

Alec was silent for a time, then he said gently, ‘Kate will be pleased with her title,’

To which Master Leslie replied shortly, ‘I see little of her. Less of her children. They shared a part of my house for a time and still have two rooms they may use whenever they wish. But Francis is much in Oxford, also the children. My lady visits widely, in attendance on my Lady Carr.’

‘That will content her even more,’ Alec said.

Master Leslie made no answer to this but began to ask a multitude of questions about the New World as he called it. Alec had much to tell, giving a very fair picture of the failures and successes of his enterprise in the settlement. The alderman was astonished to hear of the great privations he had suffered since his arrival there.

‘At least I was a free man and no longer hunted as I was in the year of my outlawry,’ Alec answered, smiling.

‘Can it in truth succeed?’ Master Leslie asked. ‘Dost see a whole life for thee in such wild and barbarous conditions?’

Alec looked about him; at the merchant’s wide room, high-ceilinged with carved plaster work; at the carved, decorated furniture, the rich hangings on the walls and at the windows, opening on to an extensive garden, planted in a formal manner. After the simplicity of his home in James Town he now found his surroundings oppressive, ostentatious, where before he had found them beautiful.

‘My life is where the sea is,’ he answered. ‘Besides, I have not yet told you, I have a wife there and a bairn, a wee girl. My Polly is daughter to the goodwife from Witton in the dales that I spoke of just now.’

‘*Married*!’

Master Leslie stared. Alec’s manner of announcing his wife had come late in the conversation, almost an afterthought. Well,

the lad was strong and lusty; he had never stinted the gratification of his desires when he came to London from Fife. Which made his apparent abstinence in his new life all the more remarkable and underlined the dangers and difficulties and sheer overburdening physical labour of that life as nothing had done in his description of it. But it did not wholly convince the shrewd old man of Alec's total acceptance of the New World, nor of his happiness in his union. He discussed the matter later with his housekeeper, Mistress Butters, the widow who had looked after his daily wants for many years, together with her young daughter, Lucy.

'Did Master Nimmo tell you he had a wife and child in James Town?' he asked her, without preamble.

He did so,' Mistress Butters answered. 'He said the little maid thrived, but her mother was still ailing somewhat from the great famine they endured over the past winter and so he had not wanted to leave her but the King commanded it.'

He said that, did he?'

'Aye and he said he would have feared to expose them to such a voyage and the babe so young.'

'I understood the birth was in May, a week before the settlement was relieved by Sir Thomas Gates. Almost four months. Perhaps he had other reasons for not bringing them.'

'Belike he had,' said Mistress Butters, pursing her lips, 'But he hath not told me of any.'

'I would indeed rejoice if he came back to me here, to my business,' the alderman ventured to say, for I grow old and he showed so much promise before—'

'It was a blessing his fate drove him off,' Mistress Butters answered, but she would not explain this further. Master Leslie, who did not agree, thought it wise not to press her. Time would show where Alec's real inclinations lay, in England or Virginia.

As the days passed while Alec waited for a summons from the King, his first feelings of unease, of distrust of the comfort, plenty and richness of his surroundings gave place to a new zest for living, based in fact upon the total recovery of his former health and strength. He had endured too much for too long. The present relaxation produced in him some of his old dangerous recklessness. Since Francis had not come from Oxford to greet him he would go and find him there.

‘Lucy,’ he said, finding the girl alone one day. ‘I may call you that, may I not, for you were scarce out of school when—’

‘Oh yes. Master Nimmo,’ she answered. ‘It is my name.’

‘Lucy,’ he began again. ‘Francis Leslie was my friend and I did him a great wrong. I think you know of this. I have tried to speak of it to thy mother and to Master Leslie but the words stick in my throat.’

‘It was not you did him the wrong,’ the girl said with downcast eyes.

‘My son,’ Alec said, seeing she knew and abandoning all further hedging. ‘Katherine’s first child, my bastard son. Tell me of him! I beg thee tell me of my son!’

His agitation as he spoke was so great it frightened her and she was half crying as she tried to answer him.

‘We knew not, though my mother sensed her fear of her condition from the day of the marriage. Poor Master Francis was so bemused by happiness he suspected nothing. I was too young to understand.’

‘Go on, Lucy! Tell me more, child! Since I had the letter from Francis I have thought and wondered and suffered—’

‘He was born at Oxford in the house of Mistress Katharine’s brother. His appearance betrayed her. He had thy features and thy red colouring.’

In spite of himself Alec let out a great laugh.

‘The rogue!’ he cried. ‘Like father, like—’

Then he recollected himself and said in a more sober voice, ‘My poor friend accepted him of his charity. He wrote kindly that he regards the boy as his own. But he did not think then that I would ever return.’

Lucy, who had been wiping her tears away and struggling to compose herself, now sat up very straight.

‘You would not upset him further!’ she exclaimed. ‘Master Francis loves the boy! You would not claim him and shame them both in the eyes of the world! Yourself too, sir, so lately pardoned! How would the King support a new scandal think you?’

Alec stared at her. A right proper lioness, he thought, in her defence of Francis. The reason for it plain on her young, unhappy face. So that was why she had shown so much grief for his sorrow, his remorse. Not for him, truly, but for Francis. Poor

child, she was no rival for Kate, unless …

He said, very gently, 'I came back because the King commanded it, Lucy. Not to claim my son. But I long to be reconciled with my friend and I would dearly like to see the boy. Advise me, Lucy. How can I do least harm?'

'You should not come to *me* for advice! Ask my mother! Ask Master Leslie! Think upon thy wife! Or hast abandoned her as you abandoned Katharine Ogilvy to save your skin?'

She jumped up and ran from him, leaving him in a very low, perplexed state of mind, but at the same time thankful to find that Francis was loved and hopeful for the possibility of his ultimate happiness.

While he continued to wait on the King's pleasure. Alec sought out the friends he had made upon the waterside in the old days. He found a rousing welcome. Encouraged by this he called upon his first friend and benefactor Dr George Ogilvy. Kate's father. The door was opened to him by the servant, Giles, who gave a cry of surprise, overlaid by fear, at recognising him. Evidently the news of Alec's pardon had not reached him or had not been understood.

But Dr Ogilvy had heard his arrival and came quickly to the door, while Thomas the groom appeared, all smiles, from the yard to lead away and water the horse.

'Welcome back, Sandy!' Dr Ogilvy cried, clasping both of Alec's hands. 'We have but just heard confirmation of thy pardon. Come in! Come in! Mistress Ogilvy will be overjoyed to see thee. In such good health, too. There were rumours—'

The good doctor scarcely stopped talking all the while Alec was in the house. He looked much older than the young man remembered him, but just as lively and interested in all that concerned fresh knowledge of the world and its wonders.

'Discoveries!' he said, leading Alec into his library and waving his hand round the shelves. 'The ancients discovered the arts of sculpture, of architecture, of government, of religious faith, if it be not blasphemy to call that an art, though I hold the presentation to be such.' He broke off his discourse with a smile. 'Now tell me of the New World and its wonders.'

He set Alec down in a chair by the window of his library and took one opposite. The window was open, the scent of gilliflowers and stocks came to them from the small garden.

Where Katharine had begun her fatal seduction of him. Alec thought, as he began his story.

Dr Ogilvy listened in astonishment to Alec's grim tales of hardship and failure, clearly believing he exaggerated them. But he did not interrupt until a knock at the door brought Giles, with a message from Mistress Ogilvy commanding Alec's appearance above stairs.

'Go then, Sandy,' Dr Ogilvy said. 'There will be time enough in the coming months to hear more of thy strange tales.'

'But Francis?' Alec said, who had been waiting to ask news of him from the man who should know the most. 'And Mistress Katharine, or rather my lady, his wife?'

'In Oxford, staying with Richard, my son. You remember—'

'Very well sir. His work—'

'You will to Oxford, no doubt, after the audience with the King. Let Francis tell all.'

So Alec had to go upstairs to Mistress Ogilvy's parlour, unsatisfied in his quest for news of Francis. He concluded from Dr Ogilvy's cordial manner that the old man had no knowledge of his own part in promoting his daughter's marriage, nor of his grandson's bastardy.

Mistress Ogilvy, on the other hand, by her barely concealed excitement and frequent mention of her daughter, led him to understand that she knew all about it, but expected him to accept the fact the child was treated as a Leslie and that he must not disturb this situation with an embarrassing claim.

'Sir Francis and Lady Leslie are very well received,' she told him, with the silly laugh he remembered. 'At Court, of course. I marvel you have not seen them there.'

'I have been in London a little more than a week,' Alec told her, 'Waiting for my summons to the King's presence. I mean to travel to Oxford to see Francis as soon as that obligation is discharged.'

'Well, yes, Francis is like to be in Oxford,' she answered. 'His knighthood was bestowed for his long task on our Bible. He is still very much the scholar, indeed more so than ever. Richard also and Celia—you recollect Celia, Richard's wife— doth nought but breed and play the scholar's wife.'

As Alec made no answer to this Mistress Ogilvy prattled on.

'Katharine finds her happiness in great company,' she said.

‘Her beauty deserves it. You will understand if you see her, but there must be no return—no attempt—’

‘My Lady Leslie pursued that ambition from her youth, madam,’ Alec said, very stiffly. ‘I am indeed pleased she hath achieved it.’

‘Aye, great beauty should not be hid from the eyes of the greatest in the land. The Queen goes seldom to Court, but my Lady Carr—and there is a young brother to Sir Robert Carr—’

‘Robbie Carr? I’d have thought he’d disappear by now or else enjoy an earldom. But I understand they are costly decorations and the King is not over-generous in his payments for his own joys.’

‘Sir Robert hath a wife, sir,’ said Mistress Ogilvy, very coldly. ‘She is this Lady Carr I speak of in connection with my daughter.’

She realised that the young man from the settlement, whom she had always admired for his appearance, but deplored for his Scottishness, was now laughing at her secretly, a former habit of his that infuriated her now as much as ever.

‘And I too have’a wife, madam,’ said Alec, rising to take his leave, a little ashamed for deliberately offending her.

‘Indeed?’ Mistress Ogilvy said. ‘An Indian lady, I presume?’

Alec’s laughter now broke into his answer, overwhelmed his manners and sent hurrying away. A good tale for Will Trent, he thought, laughing again as he took his horse from the yard.

‘He was a raw Scot when he came first to us,’ Mistress Ogilvy told her husband later. ‘But now he is a savage, pure and simple. Quite unfit for any good society.’

‘He hath suffered much,’ Dr Ogilvy answered mildly. ‘He is not his old, lively self, gay and reckless. But a better man, with a fine future, I think.’

‘So he can recover his manners.’

‘He will recover them in time. We must be patient. In a year or two—’

‘Then he will not return to that dreadful place? He says he hath a wife.’

‘Now he hath his pardon, surely he will not return. As for a wife, I think he was teasing thee, Mary.’

These assumptions were made by all who met Alec, either as old friends or new acquaintances. They had but just come to

understand the real nature of life in Virginia and the character of those who tried to establish the colony there. Alec found this ironical and depressing, since when he left James Town the community was altogether more promising than at any time he remembered it. As for staying in England, in London, at any rate, he knew that for him it was out of the question. Before, the life there had been a series of adventures. Now he was surfeited by adventure of much more horrifying kinds. Before, he had enjoyed many friends. Now the best of them was absent, some others had died, and among them old Lady Chiltern, Katharine's patron, who had no doubt gone to her grave cursing him.

He still waited a summons to the Court. 'The delay, he was told, was caused by the King's absence at his hunting lodge in Richmond. Alec took to wandering among the warehouses on the waterfront. Though he had at first been welcomed there he now found a certain restraint and caution growing among his sometime friends, as if they doubted the truth of his pardon or feared he might take offence at a trifle and break out again. Whatever the cause he had a sense of rejection, of withdrawal that saddened him.

He found a familiar boatman one day and had himself rowed across to the South Bank where he went to the Globe Theatre and asked for Master Shakespeare. But even this famous friend of former times was absent, though Master Burbage greeted him cordially.

'Will is at home on Avon,' the actor told him. 'He spends much of his time there. He hath built himself a fine house, intending it for his retirement.'

'Surely he still writes his plays?'

'Aye, with a difference. *Pericles* we have had. *Cymbeline*. Often he shows a strange bitterness. He acts seldom. But we have new men making our plays, Masters Beaumont and Fletcher, even Ben Jonson with his *Alchemist*, a fine comedy.'

Alec nodded and sighed.

'I see too many changes,' he said slowly. 'Maybe I should not have returned. Too many faces have gone. Even the boys here—'

'Ah, then, you could not expect to see them still acting women's parts. 'Tis not in nature. But there is one for you to remember. He is very young still, but twelve summers. But will take the great women's parts next year, I dare swear. 'There we

have a born actor; 's name is Dicky Robinson. Come next spring and he'll delight thee with his Rosalind.'

Next spring. Alec thought with dismay. Would he be still here next spring?

Going back to Master Leslie's house that evening he determined to find out if his audience at Court could in any way be hastened on, so that he could make plans for his future.

'It would be most unwise to approach the King direct,' Master Leslie advised.

'The Prince, then? He honoured me with his favour before.'

'And was wholly distressed by what he took to be thy crime, even though Malcolm suffered for it and indeed justly, since his villainy promoted it.'

'I cannot then expect forgiveness from the Prince? Well, I merit my punishment and must endure it.'

'Besides,' Master Leslie went on, ignoring this unusual submission, 'His Highness hath lately been invested Prince of Wales, he being sixteen years of age, a very likely youth, fair, strong, handsome and most intelligent' This was done in London?'

'At Whitehall Palace, with a masque in honour of the occasion. "Tethys Festival." Last June fifth, written by one Samuel Daniel our poet laureate, designed by Inigo Jones. The Queen took the chief part, also little Prince Charles, taking the part of Zephyr. A small thin sprite of a boy, very suitable to the part, as his mother was not.'

'Why so?'

'They say Master Jones devised a costume of floating draperies to fit the character of Queen of the Fountain or some such, but Her Majesty is still so wedded to her farthingale and her ruff she would have none of it, but appeared most unsuitably in her gold brocade as usual. Seeing she hath grown excessively fat she quite swamped her fountain, as I saw myself and wondered at such an exhibition, not knowing until after how poor Inigo Jones had been flouted in his ideas.'

But Alec did go to Court at last, in mid-December, seven weeks after his arrival back in England. There was snow on the streets, it was very cold, the assembly a relatively small one. After several presentations for various purposes Alec was moved forward towards the throne. King James extended his right

hand, Alec knelt and kissed it the King bade him rise.

'Thou art not greatly changed, Master Sandy Nimmo,' His Majesty said, smiling. 'We are pleased with thy loyal services in our colony of James Town in Virginia. We desire to have a further account of that place at some later date.'

He looked beyond Alec to his sponsor, who bowed in acknowledgement of the command. Alec then bowed very low and withdrew into the crowd, still accompanied by this man.

'I see many of the great officers of the Crown,' Alec murmured to him. 'But not my Lord Salisbury.'

'The Secretary of State is absent about the final building of his great new house at Hatfield,' the man answered. 'Here is the written scroll of your pardon, sir. I will now withdraw seeing you no longer need my services.'

They exchanged bows, thanked one another and parted. Alec disposed of his parchment in the wide pocket of his dark brown satin breeches, part of the new suit of Court clothes provided by Master Leslie.

He looked about him. He had watched the royal party for a while as he waited his turn to go forward. He had recognised the Prince of Wales from his position at the right hand of the sovereign though he was very different from the young boy he had known first more than seven years ago. The Prince had watched him closely during his exchange with King James, but had made no sign of recognition.

Behind and to the left of the throne there was another group known to Alec. Foremost was Sir Robert Carr, as he now was, the former 'Robbie' of scandalous fame, heavy jowled now, but as arrogant as ever. There was a slighter copy of his former self beside him and behind them two ladies, one of whom was Katharine Leslie.

She was as beautiful as ever. Alec thought, more beautiful indeed, a hard, brilliant, diamond beauty where before there had been a gentle innocent-seeming pearl. The pale gleaming hair had darkened into florid gold, the perfect skin was coarsened by cosmetics though Alec saw the colour mount behind the enamel on her cheeks as her eyes met his across the crowd, where he stood, as always, a head and shoulders above the rest. But she was beautiful; a great lady too, as she had always striven to be, secure now in her experience and

knowledge of men; very sure of herself and the weapon of beauty she wielded.

Though he was stirred by her and by his memories of her he had no wish for any closer intercourse. But as he was making his way out of the palace he came face to face with her, no doubt by design on her part. She had the younger Carr with her. She introduced him to Alec, greeting him coolly as an old friend of her husband.

'So the trouble that drove you away three years ago may now be forgotten, Master Nimmo?' she said, smiling.

'Aye, so, my lady,' Alec said, not smiling. 'King James is a just and generous monarch.'

'I think you have returned to Master Angus Leslie's employ,' she continued.

'I have a business in Virginia in which Master Leslie takes great interest,' he answered steadily.

'I am sure Sir Francis would wish to hear your news,' she went on. 'He was much moved to hear you lived and prospered.'

'He is here? I did not see him by the throne just now.'

She blushed again and he knew she resented this and was embarrassed by her own unease.

'He is in Oxford, Master Nimmo,' she said. 'He is seldom in London.'

'So I have learned from Mistress Butters.'

She stamped her foot, now pale with anger.

'I marvel you should listen to vulgar gossip!' she cried.

The young man beside her laid a soothing hand on her arm, but she shook him off.

'I think there is nought vulgar in the news of *Francis's* whereabouts, my lady,' Alec said, his eyes blazing in the old way that had always both alarmed and stimulated her.

But she was herself again in a moment, the great lady, the great beauty.

'You must go visit Francis in Oxford,' she said, her voice now as cold as his. 'He is with my brother Richard. The children—*all* the children—are with him.'

She gave her hand to young Master Carr and walked away without leave-taking, without looking back.

Chapter Twenty

It was well into March before the roads were fit for Alec to make the journey to Oxford. He rode alone, on a grey day, the sky overcast, the trees and hedges still bare.

The day suited his mood, but when at last he was clear of the city and breathed the country air, his spirits rose a little. He had not enjoyed the long winter in that evil-smelling, disease-ridden place, though the plague had not been evident that year, only occasional cases being reported. But Master Leslie suffered a good deal from pains in his joints and a kind of ague that reminded Alec of the usual troubles in James Town. He was able to relieve these symptoms to some extent with the medicinal infusions of cinchona bark and other samples he had carried with him from the settlement.

On the advice of Mistress Butters he took his samples with him to his private audience with King James. But the King was not impressed by them.

'Herbs! Potions! Unguents! Clysters! Hae ye no found anything of real value in that unprofitable distant land of ours? What o' the silk? The silk we commanded them to cultivate?'

'It couldna be done, Your Majesty,' Alec answered, using the form of address he found was now habitual, and falling back into the Scots way of talking the King had never lost. 'There be no mulberry trees for the worms to thrive upon. A substitute was sought, but without success.'

'And Roanoke? What of the lost colony?'

Alec described the stone, the theories, the lack of any further clues. When he mentioned Raleigh, whom he knew to be still imprisoned in the Tower, the King's face darkened.

'No gold, no silk, a trifle of silver. What use to us is this demanding and very expensive colony?'

'It is a fine country,' Alec answered, but could not find words to describe his feeling for the extent and grandeur of those vast forests, great rivers, the wide bay into which they flowed, the mountains and waterfalls that barred the path of exploration.

Exploration, he thought, as he rode forward on the muddy

road towards Oxford. How could any man, living his life in this fertile, gentle, much-populated land of southern England, imagine what that word meant in Virginia? How begin to describe it to him? The King had listened but learned nothing; his greed for gain disappointed, that was all. The Prince of Wales, sending at last for Alec, was more eager to hear, showed his old interest in illness and accident and remedies for such, listened with eager horror to tales of native cruelty and then, ignoring Alec's private life or unwilling to hear it, wished him well in his new life and brought the interview to an end.

Perhaps, Alec thought, when the young man became king he would take a proper interest in that far-distant struggle. Perhaps he himself had failed to promote interest because he had already begun to lose interest in his turn. Master Leslie had hinted at a partnership. Though London town oppressed and disgusted him, the alderman's house was very comfortable. He had suffered from privation and danger for so long that the contrast had at first stunned, then repelled, but now delighted him. So much so that, four months after his return, he found the settlement further off, less important, less compelling, moving away into a past he had outgrown, as he had outgrown his youth—

He changed horse at Reading. Crossing the Thames there for the second time he smiled to himself at the narrow stream, one of England's largest rivers. He remembered the great width of the James River, the Potomac, the Powhatan Creek, even. But again he thought of them as very far away, things visited, remembered, and now docketed where they would lie henceforth in memory. He thought of Captain John Smith, who had returned after a troublesome voyage, had recovered from his accident and lived now in retirement, writing a book of his experiences. To visit the captain would bring the settlement too near, so he had shrunk from it and only now realised the reason.

'This second day of his journey to Oxford broke in sunshine, a pale sun in a sharp blue sky. But it shone on almond blossom in the gardens of the old convent at Littlemore, pink blossom against grey ruins, with the spires of the colleges grown near and high.

As he moved on from Littlemore he thought of Mat Scrivenor with sadness and then, with a sudden pang of alarm and pain, of Polly. Polly, his wife, mother of his child. How little he had

thought of them since his arrival back in England. How shamefully little! Why so?

Master Leslie had expressed interest and surprise when he had learned the history of the Sugdens, perhaps too a little disapproval of what he must consider a misalliance. He had not mentioned Alec's wife in any subsequent discussion of his future.

Mistress Butters had been sympathetic, but guarded. After his failure to hear of Francis from Lucy Butters he had confided his fears and feelings to her mother, who also knew of the younger Francis's bastardy. She accepted the father's remorse without comment, but was very firm as to the boy's relationship with his foster-father.

'Sir Francis loves the child. I trust, sir, you will do nothing to upset him on this score.'

'I'll not be taking the boy away to Virginia!' he had cried passionately. 'I'll not harm him in any way!'

'You have your own family there,' Mistress Butters reminded him.

And now Virginia and Potty and little Anne, called after Mistress Laydon, had grown so far away from him he had scarcely considered them at all of late and only now because he had remembered that other lost friend, Mat.

But Francis was not dead, though he might still be lost. Alec rode on into Oxford town in a very real state of dread. Also with a new fear of seeing that son who loved Francis and whom Francis loved.

He need not have feared. His arrival was expected, but both Francis and his brother-in-law were at work in the colleges where each taught the young undergraduates and also conducted their researches into their several subjects. Instead of meeting them at once Alec was taken into the garden of Master Richard's pleasant house where his wife, Celia, with a nursemaid, sat watching five children at play on the grass this fine spring morning, while a sixth lay sleeping in a wooden rocking cradle beside them.

When she saw Alec approaching Mistress Celia sprang up and bobbed him a short, demure curtsey. But her inner excitement got the better of her. She moved quickly to him, both hands extended.

'We had news from Doctor Ogilvy that thou would'st visit us,

Sandy,' she said. 'I may still call thee by that name, I hope?'

'Ay, madam,' he answered, his voice breaking with the quick emotion that had overwhelmed him at her eager welcome. 'I would I could look for a like greeting from'—he meant to say Francis, but the name choked him—from thy husband.'

She was serious at once, still holding both his hands and looking up very kindly into his face.

'Richard understood the whole from the beginning,' she said carefully. 'As I do. So we need not speak of it. Only of our pleasure that the King hath granted thee justice and mercy. And that thy venture to those parts was successful. And that thou art safely home again.'

She turned to lead him to the house, leaving the nursemaid in charge of the children. But he checked her, pointing at the lively tumbling group, two girls and three boys, the boys of about the age, maybe, of young Francis, his son.

'These be not all thine, I reckon?' he said, trying to smile to cover his anxiety, not wishing to offend.

'Heaven forbid!' she answered laughing. 'That dark-haired boy and the smaller of the two girls belong to Francis; they have the Leslie features, have they not? The three tow-heads are mine, also the babe in the cradle. Ogilvy as to their colouring, all four, but the younger two favour my own father's family.'

Again she turned towards the house, determined to forestall the question she had not the heart to answer. For she had seen the anguish in Alec's face when she had named all the children and his own was not among them. But Francis had forbidden her to speak. Besides, she had no wish to do so. The matter lay between the friends, if they could still so be called.

It seemed they could. Richard Leslie was home first. He took Alec into his own room, lined with books, manuscripts and other papers lying in piles upon a fine strong oak gate-legged table. He listened to Alec's description of his wanderings, but broke off when he heard a step outside the door.

'I think it will be Francis,' he said. 'I'll leave thee with him. He is changed, you must know. But so art thou, my poor Sandy. God be with you both!'

He was through the door before Alec was well upon his feet. Francis came in.

He was not so changed in appearance that Alec did not know

him. But, even as they stood staring at one another, it was apparent that the Inward change was very great Indeed. His boyhood, too, was over as was Alec's. He, too, had suffered, had endured, had survived, weathered, hardened, but not shrivelled, Alec saw, thanking God for it.

Francis had prepared a speech for this encounter, much as he prepared his lectures for his pupils, with the same aim of tiding over an opening, a beginning, that must promote interest, contact, acceptance, before the criticism of resentment of one in an inferior position could spoil the combined effort of teacher and taught.

They had not moved since the door closed behind Richard. Francis stood just within it, Alec beside the chair where he had sat talking.

Francis said, 'It was an evil bastard parted us, Sandy, putting us all in peril. He paid with his life for his part in that plot, that miscalculation, whereby he and his familiar, Kenty, sought to establish power over you. It is an innocent bastard, thine, stands between us now. I had not foreseen the possibility of thy return when I forgave thee in my heart. But I do not take it back. In my betrayal thou took the lesser part.'

Alec did not attempt to stop this clearly prepared statement. In sorrow he heard it, but also in relief. Francis, the gentle sensitive youth who had given him so great relief from the rigours of his childhood's home at Pittenweem, was now dead and gone, but Francis the poet, the user of words, still lived, confident, skilled in learning, rewarded for his services in making the Divine Word open to all in the new Bible.

Following this thought when Francis stopped speaking Alec said, 'We are both much changed. I never had any expectation of return. Indeed of life itself. I cannot yet see clearly how I may now proceed. But with thy permission, if our former friendship is to be in any way renewed, I would dearly like to see my son.'

'He is no longer with us here,' Francis answered at once. 'For which I thank God in His goodness.'

Alec was amazed, horrified.

'He is dead!' he cried, in despair at this cruel renewal of punishment.

'Nay, nay!'

Francis, seeing his friend so stricken, opened his heart to him

again in a great cry of compunction. He took him by both arms, tears flooding his eyes.

'Nay, Sandy, he lives! But with my parents at Kilessie! He is a strong, self-willed child, very like his father. Mistress Ogilvy would have none of him. Kate—'

He broke off when Alec put a great arm about his neck and thanked him again and again with emotion for his goodness to the child. After that they went to join the others, each knowing that a new friendship lay between them, firm and unshakeable, though their lives lay so far apart now that the old intimacy could never be renewed.

But the next day Francis explained further how it came about that he had taken the boy to live in Scotland.

'Kate never loved him, never forgave the poor atom for his likeness to thee at his birth. After she bore me my own son and later my daughter her enmity against poor Francis grew. She punished him for faults that should have been overlooked. He is big and strong. He began to resent her way with him and turned to Lucy Butters, for our nursemaid at that time took my lady's part. This caused more injustice to the lad, with jealousy of Lucy a part of it. So in the end, the laird pressing me all the time to show him his grandson, I took him north.'

'So they know nothing? They take him for thy elder son?'

'They know nothing and will never know. But I think my old nurse who still lives, but grows very old, doth suspect, though I would never listen to her questions, but feigned not to hear them.'

After a pause Alec said, 'How fares he since parting with thee? Mistress Celia speaks of a great love between ye. She knows the truth, I believe, though she says nothing.'

'All the Ogilvys know the truth except the learned doctor, good old man, who came nigh to beating his wife when she tried to tell him. Since when all have been careful to keep silence.'

'Not to me,' Alec said ruefully, recounting his experience at the house in Paternoster Row.

Francis laughed but grew serious again.

'Ye will leave the boy at Kilessie altogether?' Alec asked. 'There be no young folks now in that house unless thy brother—'

'Marry? Aye, but he hath and bred an heir to Kilessie as well. My life is in Oxford. Already since my preferment I have a house

building I'll show thee. But young Francis, I dare not have return till he hath more command of himself.'

'Dare not?'

Francis at last told the final reason for the boy's exile. Provoked by Katharine as she sat with her embroidery he had snatched up her cutting shears and ran to stab her, but she beat down his little arm so fiercely that not only did the shears fly across the room but the bone of the arm was bent sideways.

'Not broken across on acount of his youth,' Francis explained. 'He was scarcely three at the time. The surgeon straightened it and bound it to a stiffened strip of leather, so it mended without trace.'

Alec nodded. His son was better off at Kilesse. Perhaps only for a time, perhaps for good. From what he had seen and heard Lady Leslie would in future spend less and less time in scholastic circles than at the Court. Perhaps in the end this marriage that had begun so ill would break openly, since in private it had never truly joined.

Alec spent three days more at Oxford and then rode off north, bearing a letter from Francis to his father explaining about the King's pardon of his friend. Alec Nimmo would call to pay his respects to the laird and his wife, to reestablish himself with them. Also to see young Francis Leslie as he had already met the younger children in Oxford.

'I must also see my own parents,' Alec explained. 'And the Macllroys. I must show my pardon to all at St Andrews.'

'I have no news of Master Nimmo,' Francis said. 'But I think poor Janet hath lost her husband of a fever, though not her son.'

'There were no other children?'

'None that I heard speak of.'

Though Alec found himself more at home in Oxford than in London and though he rejoiced at his reconciliation with his friend he was no nearer coming to any decision about his future course. Indeed as he crossed the Border, passed over the Lammermuirs and took ferry from Musselborough across the Forth to Fife, his love of his native land came back to him renewed. In safety, in honour, he rode past Loch Leven to Falkland below the Lomonds; to Kilessie, where a cordial and dignified welcome greeted him after the laird had read his son's letter.

Young Francis was presented to him. The boy had Alec's clear blue eyes, equally defiant, equally ready to blaze with anger. But his hair had lost the reddish tinge or rather this was hidden now in the bright gold mop that covered his head.

'He takes after his mother's colouring,' Alec said, steadily. 'The younger boy is dark like Francis.'

This remark was received calmly, without comment. Alec was invited to spend the night at Kilessie. The old people retired to bed very early. Francis's brother and his young wife, a pleasant country girl, daughter of a neighbouring laird, entertained the visitor.

They discussed Francis, his wife, whom they had never seen but heard much gossip about, and the boy. Not a likely scholar, all agreed, though he was only just four years old; not a farmer either. Perhaps a soldier or an officer in the King's navy. He had a ready sense of command, Master Leslie said, smiling. But time would show.

Time would show many things, Alec decided, riding on the next morning to St Andrews. After all his imaginings, all his hopes and fears, the encounter with his son had left him with a feeling of flatness, even disillusion. A child, very like other children. A healthy child, scarcely at all overawed by the formality of his introduction to his supposed father's great friend. No emotion, no real contact. Which Alec, musing again over the future, was honest enough to give thanks for.

So be it, then. A very ordinary, a very frequent situation going back into all human history, no doubt going forward into times to come. So long as the real victim, the child, did not suffer. He comforted himself, as Francis, far more learned, had done, with tales of noble, successful bastards of the past. Then cursed himself for a hypocrite and rode through St Andrews without stopping, out to the East Neuk to find his God-fearing, Devil-ridden parents at Pittenweem.

But they were gone. A strange face came to the door of his childhood's home to explain that the house had been empty these two years and they newly come to it from Anstruther. Upon searching the quays of the harbour he found men he knew, and learned about their going. Both, dead, he from an apoplexy six months after Alec's outlawry, she from a wasting disease a year later.

So they had never learned of his ultimate escape, his success and now his pardon. As he rode back towards St Andrews he wondered if in the cold, strict, severe heaven his father had looked forward to, a fairer-minded God Almighty, a gentle Christ, a gracious Lady Mother, had explained to them his present condition.

He went first to the University to re-establish himself, receiving praise and congratulation from the head of St Leonard's, his old college.

Next he went to the Town Kirk to pray for his parents' souls, to ask again for mercy for himself and for guidance in his present confusion of mind.

After that, not understanding his reluctance, he made his way to Doctor MacBroy's house near Gregory Place.

The manservant who before had betrayed him, was no longer there. A little maid opened the door, who stood gawping at him for so long that Alec asked for a message to be taken to her master to say that an old friend wished to see him.

'Maister canna come to 'ee,' the girl said. 'He's no able to leave's bed these many months.'

'Then is Mistress Galbraith here the noo?' Alec's Scottish speech, revived immediately he found himself in his native land, relapsed still further.

But there was no need to wait for an answer. Janet was sweeping towards him, the little maid exclaimed and fled and her voice, commanding but not aggressive, asked, 'What is your business with my father, sir? He is not able to receive strangers.'

'Janet!' Alec said, stepping forward into the house, 'Dost not know me?'

She gasped, stepped back, for a moment overcome by surprise, shock, plunging emotion.

'Sandy! Dear God, not still a fugitive?'

'Nay, Janet. With a free pardon from the King. No man may touch me now. Not even a revengeful Scots lord.'

She took him to the little parlour he had never forgotten, where eight years ago, in the week of the King's accession, he had taken painful leave of her, his first true love.

There she told him of her husband's death and her father's incapacity.

'He is paralysed,' she said, her voice trembling. 'His speech

too is affected, though his mind is there, struggling to express—' she could not go on.

'May I speak to him?' Alec asked gently. 'Wilt prepare him, tell of my survival and my return and my pardon?'

'Aye. Wait thou here. I'll no' promise anything. But wait.'

So after a while she came back and took him to Doctor Macllroy's bedside. The old man knew him, pressed his hand with a stiff clutch of fingers, mumbled incoherent words, tears flowed freely down his lined cheeks. Alec thought he understood but could not be sure.

Back in the parlour he found wine and sweetmeats on the table. Janet seated herself and invited him to take a chair opposite. Again he was reminded of his last real interview with her. The brief encounter during his flight four years before did not seem to matter.

He gave her a full account of his adventures, both in Scotland and the New World. He saw her eyes brighten as her imagination followed his words.

'Wonderful!' she breathed several times. And then said, 'So now thou art home again, Sandy? To settle—where?'

It was too crudely put, too eagerly. He had told her his parents were dead, implying there was, now no barrier between them. Besides, as a widow she had a free choice. Her purpose in that question, was sadly plain.

He said, to divert her thoughts, 'And thou, Janet. Tell me thy story. A sad one, I fear, but thou hast thy son.'

He did not tell her of his own; that would be too dangerous. It must never be known by any in Fife that young Francis was base-born.

She described her marriage and its outcome, very briefly, with bitterness. She had not been happy. She now looked for much less in life. Unless …'

'Unless thou marry again,' he told her, firmly.

She hung her head, waiting.

Alec was appalled at his clumsiness. He saw no way of escape that would not now hurt her.

'I must not stay,' he said, preparing to rise. 'I have to be in London before the month be out to settle my business with Master Leslie and find ship for my return.'

He knew, quite finally, that he could settle nowhere in

England or Scotland, but that he must go back to Virginia and the new life he had begun to make there. Janet's face was hidden from him but she put up her hands to cover it and he knew she was crying.

He went down on his knees beside her, putting his arms round her as he had done on that other occasion.

'I must go, Janet. I must. There is nought for me here. My father is gone and his business with him. My life is in no way fitted to scholarship.'

'I would I were a man and could go with thee,' she said. 'But I'll no' leave my father while he lives.'

She had said this, too, before. The whole scene had become strange, unreal a repetition of an old song, outdated, outrageous. He got to his feet.

'I must go,' he repeated. 'I love and honour thee for thy wish, Janet, but I must go back to my home, to my wife and the little maid, my daughter.'

He bent and kissed her. Not in the way he had formerly, a boy in a love idyll but as a man who had seldom tried to suppress the passion he felt for any personable woman.

She pushed him away, her cheeks flaming.

'Go then,' she said, panting, 'and God defend thy poor wife from such as thee! Men have aye used women ill and will do so for aye, I'm thinking. I thought better of thee, Alexander Nimmo, but I was sair mistaken!'

He rode away from St Andrews with a heart much lightented by the revelation that had come to him in Doctor Macllroy's house. He looked about him at the beloved scene of Fife and the Ochil mountains beyond, but his thoughts turned away to the greater, mysterious, tree-clad mountains of Virginia, the amazing forests, the mighty rivers. And to Polly, his wife, his true love, whose devotion was unending, whose earth-born knowledge kept her close to earth and its ways, accepting reality; whose strength in her own sphere equalled his own. As he rode on he longed to be with her, he was amazed that he had thought so little about her since his return.

On the way south he went aside from near Ripon to visit Witton. The Cow and Calf was totally unchanged. Meg Sugden's brother-in-law was polite, pleased to have news of the Sugdens' success in their venture, pleased to hear he had married Poll

pleased to get rid of him as soon as possible.

In London the Virginia Company was in ferment. Lord de la Warr, unable to throw off his illness, was on his way home. Sir Thomas Dale had left in March, while Alec was in Oxford, to take his place. Captain Sam Argall had visited Sagadahoc, being blown off course from Bermuda, and had found it reestablished.

'A better climate, more friendly natives and a direct seaboard,' Master Angus Leslie said. 'Consider it, Sandy lad. The captain saith the great cod are so succulent he could live off them for ever.'

'The captain is in town, sir?'

'Aye and asking for thee.'

Alec took ship with Argall late in May, 1611. They arrived in the James River in July. Plantations covered the whole peninsula. Fruit trees were covered with young fruit. Mistress Sugden and her brother met Alec as he came ashore.

'And Polly?' he asked as soon as he had greeted them.

'I told her to wait at home,' his mother-in-law answered. 'Seeing we had no news of thy coming. Nor any news of thee at all for best part o't year.'

'You thought I'd not return?' Alec was astonished, forgetting his own great confusion on this subject.

He did not wait for her answer but ran in through the palisade leaving the others to deal with his baggage. He found Polly standing in the doorway of their house, the little maid Anne beside her and in her arms, held upright now to see his father, a big handsome boy, red curls covering his head, a wide grin on his toothless mouth.

'My son! And I never knew! I never thought!'

'Thou never asked,' she said laughing. 'My mother said! thee'd come back if told. I would have thee return unknowing.'

'As I have come, wanting thee only,' he said, kissing her for the third time at which the baby, alarmed, began to wail.

'This is where I belong,' Alec said, pushing them all before him gently into the house. 'This great new land. Farther to the north, maybe, for the cod-fishing. But together, my dearest love, always together.'

'Thou fraud!' she cried happily. 'Cod-fishing! Farther north! 'Tis adventure is thy dearest love, not Polly!'

They laughed and kissed and embraced again; for the great

love and true understanding between them.

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